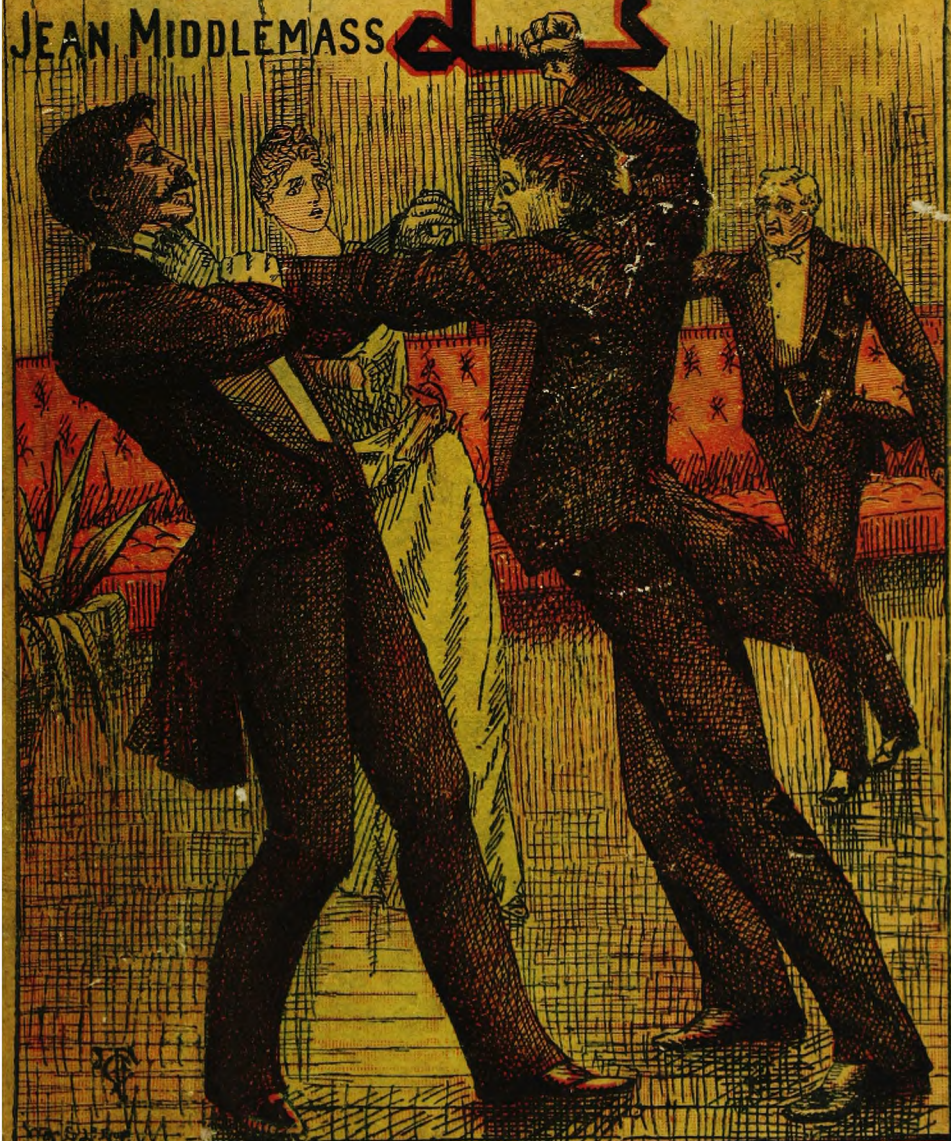


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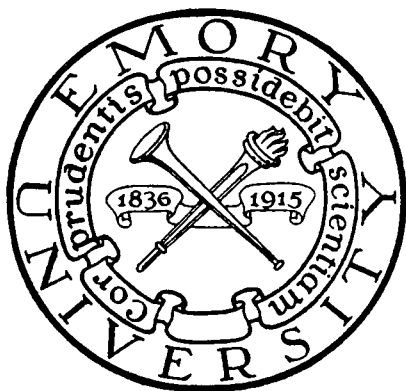
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VAIA'S LORD.

BY

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Author of "Wild Georgie," "Sackcloth and Broadcloth," "Dandy," etc., &c.



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VAIA'S LORD.

CHAPTER I.

HOW GIRLS TALK.

"WELL, you are lucky, dear; he is charming," said Marion to her friend, as Clarence Hood left the house.

"You think so?" returned the girl addressed, whose name was Vaia Temple. She spoke in a listless, even dejected, manner, and gave a slight shrug to her shapely shoulders.

"Why, don't you, dear?" exclaimed Marion, opening her large eyes. Then, with an *espièglerie*, which especially suited her prettiness, "Well, if you want to be off your bargain, pray transfer your cousin, Mr. Hood, to me. Remember, I am not the great Miss Temple—mistress of herself and ever so much besides. Here the smallest contribution in the shape of a lover, or even of a suitor, would be gratefully received."

"Why, you greedy little monkey!"

"Monkey!"

"Yes; all girls are monkeys at seventeen. But it is one thing to value an article only moderately ourselves; quite another to give it away, even to so great a little pal as——. But what are you counting on your tiny fingers, you little *blonde diablesse*?"

"To see how many years it is since you were a monkey."

"You *are* a little demon! I swear it," said the elder girl, stopping her mouth with a kiss. "Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" and she was sad again.

"I don't like the tone of those sighs, Vi. No, not at all."

"Well, tune them."

"You shall sigh not at all. Now you are thinking of Mr. Hood again."

"How do you know?"

"Because I do."

"And you are right. Oh!" she exclaimed, rising and pacing the boudoir where they were, her hands clasped high in air right over her head. "Why,—why,—why——"

"Why what, your majesty?"

"Why cannot I marry you, or a child, or some nice old woman, or even my horse? I should be delighted!"

"Now you are talking nonsense."

"Impossible! Oh, thanks so for telling me." This with a touch of pique, real or feigned; probably a mixture of both.

She pursued,—*"Love, how delightful! Marriage, ecstatic! But the man—the man spoils all."*

"Then change him."

"Idiot! I mean any man."

"You are wrong. Given that I must be married to something, I should prefer a man."

"Indeed! But you always were eccentric."

"To be married to a dog, a cat, or a bird is so old-maidish."

"I own it. I also own that if I hate a man, I am excessively fond of men."

"I have often thought so."

"You see, men," pursued Vaia, disclaiming the taunt—"men is an entity which one cannot wed in

this country at present; at least," she added, catching herself up with a serio-comic toss of her handsome, rather classic features, "only under very disagreeable circumstances."

"Divorce and death," jerked out Marion, imperturbably. Then, seeing she was going to be rebuked, she added, "Go on."

"Even *a* man, a husband, is an idea far from repellent to me."

"That's right."

"As an idea. I confess that in the abstract, in books, plays—even in real life, when I hear of a girl being engaged to some nice handsome fellow, I am interested and attracted. I generally go so far as to envy her; nay, more, if I chance to meet the fascinating individual, I am often delighted with him. I continue to envy the *fiancée*; but mind, I feel even then that, if he could suddenly transfer his allegiance to me, I should instantly loathe him."

This time there was no banter, but a touch of real sympathy in Marion's monosyllabic comment as she said,—

"Strange!"

She rose and put her arm round the other's waist, and they paced the room together—now and again mechanically pausing opposite the window to gaze at the spring landscape of Hyde Park.

Presently the younger girl said,—

"Do you know what I make of it all?"

"What?"

"Oh, I think it very sad and awful."

"Never mind. Let it be sad and awful if you like, but speak out."

"Well, I have, of course, no experience; but then I have known you so long and so well, that I think I can read into your—your case, as the doctors call it, if into no other."

"Well, dear?"

"It seems to me, Vi, that the being predestined to have all your sighs—mind, I speak under correction—is certainly not an old maid's cat. That there are women who could never, under any circumstances, be happy as wives, I feel sure—women whose ideal could never, under any conditions, take a human shape, even in imagination."

"Why, bless me, Marion, where have you been reading all these fine definitions—this hair-splitting of the psychological analyzer?"

"Well, I own I have picked up a thing or two lately from books; but I am, I hope, quite capable of putting them to an original application."

"Well?"

"Well, your present state of mind—or it would be more correct to say of heart, for an unoccupied or fallow state of that interesting organ is as much a state as any other—with all that you have just been saying and implying on the subject of man and men, convinces me that you are the very woman to love, and to make a husband and yourself supremely happy; but, either you have not yet seen the right man——"

"But I am engaged to Clarence Hood!"

"Or that you have hitherto failed to recognise in him the one you are, perhaps, after all, destined to love."

"Never!"

"Never what?"

"If I live a thousand years, I shall never care for him a bit more than I do at this moment; but it seems to me quite on the cards I may like him less and less."

"Then—— But is this really, honestly true?"

"Yes; on my soul."

"Then I shall not let you marry him."

"Oh, why not? He'll do as well as any other."

"Vaia, I read in a book the other day, 'A

woman is sometimes won by dint of love—a man never.' And I think it so true. Are you sure you will never be won by Clarence Hood? for that he loves you with what Shakespeare calls 'an enraged affection,' is patent to anybody."

"He does, indeed, worse luck! Do you know, child——"

"I'm not a child!"

"Well then, sweet monkey, little woman."

"Yes; I like 'little woman.' Go on."

"Then, do you know, my chief objection to taking Clarence Hood is just that he cares for me so passionately. If one is to wed, as I am doing, without love glammers, mirage, enthusiasm, the only thing to make it bearable to my mind is a similar state of feeling in 'the happy man.'"

Marion hereupon put her pretty white hand to her whiter brow, and, leaving her companion, went and threw herself upon a sofa in an attitude of deep reflection.

"What is the matter now?—headache?"

"No; only a slight thinking pain. It is an ill more moral than physical, and I often have it when I am puzzled."

"And has the oracle stopped speaking?" asked Vaia, dropping down by her side.

"Vaia, you shall not marry Mr. Hood; and to save you from such a fate, I would—I would——"

"What?"

"Why, marry him myself?"

"Oh, that is the drift of all your philosophy, is it?"

"I believe you now," said Marion, pursuing her own thoughts. "I feel you will never love him, and—and that is not the worst of it."

"I don't understand."

"I also feel that you will some day, if you do marry him, *meet another—the man.*"

"May!"

"For that he exists is certain."

"May!"

"Galivanting about at this moment — busy, I dare say, with his thirty-sixth flirtation."

"Marion, what do you take me for?"

"Only for a woman."

"And my honour?"

"Well, stupid, I never said you would listen to him—you are not that sort. I am not thinking of your honour, but your happiness. Now a temptation is not apt to diminish through resisting it. Your life will be blighted; you will hate and loathe poor Hood, and—no, I see it all—you shall never have him!"

"Dearest, your word-picture is most eloquent. I feel ashamed to meet it with so ugly a monosyllable as—fudge!"

"Not flattering, I must say; but come, demolish my scaffolding piecemeal, I pray."

"Well, of course, from your premises it is logic itself. But you beg the question from the beginning. I may have been born with a somewhat high-flown romantic disposition. I have quite lost it now, and, I honestly think, for good and all."

"And from what cause?"

"Time, experience, disappointment!"

"Disappointment! Not in the domain of love?"

"Well, no—so far as I have never been in love, no; but I am disappointed—half with myself, half with men in general—sorely disappointed; so much so, that I could live and die without once feeling the tender passion."

"It will come yet."

"No; I am too old."

"Yes, dear—quite tottering. Where do you get your hair-dye. If it be required at your age, one cannot find it out too soon."

"Silly child! I don't mean old in years, al-

though you had the impertinence just now to pretend you could not reckon up the time since I was seventeen without the assistance of the fingers of both hands."

"You know I only did it because you are very young, and look much younger still."

"But I feel so old—so old in soul!"

"You are, in point of fact, two-and-twenty."

"Three-and-twenty next month."

"Well, I never! as old nurse says. Three-and-twenty, and youth gone already! A girl does not come out till she is eighteen. If she has elder sisters still hanging fire, she is often kept in a year or two later, or else her birthday comes at an awkward time of the year, and so, not to bring her out *before* eighteen, she is left in the school-room nearly a year longer. Then when the blessed child at length takes the plunge, everybody calls her a chit, and a bread-and-butter miss, and all the rest of it; so that she doesn't find her legs for, say, a twelvemonth more. At last the poor thing is just beginning to know people, and to get known—perhaps liked a little; when, after a few months—for there are only twelve, you know, in a year—just when she is beginning really to enjoy herself, in short, she is to discover that a woman who is not married is old at two or three-and-twenty; that life, so far as it deserves the name, is over after three seasons! Well, Vaia, I can only say, if that is to be the limit of the glorious *première jeunesse*, anybody may have mine for two-pence-halfpenny!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed her friend; "delicious child! How I do love to hear you talk! Most of all when you get warm and excited! But, darling, I don't want to limit *your* span of fun and illusion. You must not imagine that I represent—that I am a fair type of the average girl."

"Why should you not be?"

"Because—but I doubt if I ought to tell you. I have never breathed a word of it to any one before."

"And why?"

"Oh, first, because I am too proud; and next, because I think a woman who grumbles and moans over her fate must be an insufferable bore."

"I'll chance the boring, Vi."

"But I fear by stripping the gingerbread of its gilt, to make your future like my own; for I feel sure 'anticipation oftentimes moulds the soul for weal or woe.'"

"But, darling Vi," said the girl, nestling close up to her, "did you think my tirade just now—for I know it was one—sprung out of regret for my selfish little self, and my future? No, I assure you, dear; a good nine-tenths of it was pure indignation that *your* dreams should be over, your bright course, so to speak, run. Do, do tell me all. I know, I hope I might do you some good."

Vaia kissed the girl's sunny curls.

"My pet, shall I tell you the secret of my life?"

"Then you have a secret! I know it! Oh, how delightful! Do be quick and make a clean breast of it!"

"Child! it is not what you think. I am sorry you should lose the joy of a real sensational, old-fashioned secret, but, alas!——"

"Oh! if it were a crime, I feel I could forgive it in you."

"It is very little to tell. Everything to me, it is scarce anything to the most sympathizing listener."

"I am sorry, but go on."

"I have only to record a change—a terrible change, perfectly comprehensible to me; yet I almost despair of making it so to you, most in-

telligent of little beings though you be — since it will appear to you so causeless."

"Well, we shall see."

"Know, then, that I was once a great dreamer—that, indeed, my whole childhood and youth may be said to have been mainly nourished with dreams and fictions; as far, I mean, as leisure and relaxation were concerned."

"When you were not squaring the circle, you read the 'Arabian Nights'?"

"Exactly! you barely knew my father, but he held that women, having, probably from heredity, feminine minds, stand in far more need of a masculine education than men do."

"I wish mine had been like him; perhaps then it would not have been my constant reproach that I can think, but not reason."

"Well, your drawing a clear distinction between the two is, of itself, a sign of no little wisdom, I should say. However, you were taught the usual, I the unusual things; by the latter, I chiefly mean mathematics, logic, rhetoric; and I went through more critical and extended studies in literature than is generally thought necessary for girls. I do not know that I ever gained more than may be called a fair smattering in any of them; but my poor father was satisfied, and I am grateful, for I feel that these things, rather reluctantly undertaken for his sake, have left a permanent impression on my mind."

"Pardon, dear," said Marion gently, "if I interrupt you for a moment, but do you not find one terrible drawback to any advantage thus gained? I mean, does it not become doubly irritating to a mind trained like yours, to be doomed to listen to the blatant nonsense which does duty for conversation in half our drawing-rooms?"

"Everything, of course, has its price; and there

is much in what you say. I regret it most when it makes me rude; for, you know, I am detestably rude sometimes."

"You are—you are to those you dislike."

"Which includes all idiots."

"Except me!"

"If you are one. I had forgotten it. But to resume," said Vaia. "I console myself by thinking that of these studies we are talking of, I know far less than most well-informed men, and that if they can endure all the arguments which are no arguments, the logic which is not logic, why, I feel rather honoured to suffer in their company. Now if you think the consciousness that I can reason has made me conceited——"

"But I don't, dear, not a scrap."

"And you are right, because for every peg that such a gift sends me up in the scale of self-esteem, it certainly pulls one down a good ten. Well, you will think I am never coming to the point."

"I am patient, but curious," said Marion, glancing up with frolicsome blue eyes at the friend who spoiled and loved her so.

"I divided life into two distinct parts—the dull, peaceful, monotonous—which we all experience with but little difference—the routine of existence, and then the other—Oh! that other!—the adventurous, bewildering, ecstatic; the love-bringing period when the fates are most busy with our destiny; that time which we dreamers and romance-readers look forward to with trembling delight from our very childhood, and which, once over, is to be for ever looked back upon as the cream of one's days, and whose events and sensations are never really more similar in any two of our lives than are our features, figures, or handwritings."

"Oh, delightful!" cried Marion. "That is the part I want to hear about. Go on."

"So did I. I hoped high hopes, yet prepared myself for what I deemed the worst. I did this lest I should die of disappointment. I was to be the victim of misplaced affection—I know not what; all kinds of shocks and crimes would often appear like spectres about my steps; yet I had schooled myself to bear all; for, even in my darkest dreams, one picture was ever present, which consoled me for all."

"Yes, yes, and that was——" gasped Marion, as her friend fairly stopped for breath.

"I was to love—love with a wildness and intensity which seemed to me the easiest thing in the world; and I was to be beloved, or fully imagine myself so, in like fashion. Kneeling at my feet, my hands upon his upturned brow, my love and I were to draw from each other magic powers for overcoming the money obstacles—for these were always numerous and frightful—which beset our path."

"Well, and the result?"

"No climax, no drama, no obstacles, no lover, no anything."

And Vaia rose and walked excitedly to the window.

"Oh, Vi!" said the young girl, in no mocking tone of dejection. "What a sell!"

"You are right; that is just the word for it."

"But surely the time may yet come?"

"Never! And what will surprise you still more than all, I haven't the slightest wish that it ever should. I can still believe in romantic love for other people; in you, for instance, but not for me—not for me!"

"And you have never felt it?"

"No, on my honour. I feel sure the man does not walk the earth who, loving me, could disturb my peace. A few years ago, he *might*."

"And so——"

"And so I shall marry my Cousin Clarence. Life to me is a series of days all wonderfully like each other. You may do this, that, or the other, and it matters precious little what. The chief result seems to be that one goes on growing a little older all the time. The most we can hope for is that Heaven will spare us any very terrible sufferings; but I shall always think the bare fact of being alive at all is something of a wonder. *Voilà tout!*"

"It is not encouraging, I must own," said Marion, still on the sofa.

"And I am sorry I told you."

"I am very glad."

"Why, may one ask?"

"Because I want to convert you."

"You?"

"Well, or to see you converted, I don't care which."

"Converted by whom?"

"Oh, no fairy—a magician."

"Where will you find him?"

"He will *come*."

"And what is he to convert me to?"

"Why, to the joys of loving, to be sure!"

At this point any farther confidence between the pair was, for the time being, cut short by the entrance upon the scene of a much finer lady than both of them combined—of no less a person, indeed, than Vaia's stately mamma, Lady Amaranth Temple.

CHAPTER II.

A LONDON MOTHER.

LADY AMARANTH may be best described as one of those redoubtable, but too often under-rated, forces—a successful mediocrity. She had not the slightest pretension to be anything but an agreeable woman of fashion, whose native quickness and natural good sense compensated very fairly for that want of education, in its true sense, which her late husband had tried to remedy in Vaia. He had even thought, when he first married, of instilling his own love of study into his bride; but he very soon found how futile would be any efforts in that direction; for Lady Amaranth lost no time in telling him, with a bewitching smile, that her pet aversion was thinking. Now, as in that large part of culture which is independent of conscious thinking, her ladyship was already a past mistress, the Honourable James Temple, second son of Lord Castlemore, had resigned himself, with the best grace he could, to taking her as she was; and most of the fashionable authorities of the day were of opinion that he had no bad bargain of it either. To be sure his noble bride brought him but a very slender dower; but as Mr. Temple inherited some eight thousand a year from his maternal uncle—who, truth to tell, was neither more nor less than a great Lancashire cotton-spinner—he could well afford to be indifferent on that score.

No doubt it was a very pretty income in the abstract; but small if you are to make it look like double, and yet keep out of debt; and this was one

of the many clever things which Lady Amaranth managed to do.

We say Lady Amaranth advisedly, for her husband, with whom she always lived very happily, was wonderfully indifferent alike to money itself and to most things it will bring; and as we seldom attain to any subtle understanding in matters which fail to interest us, James Temple lived and died one of the most stupid of beings, as far as money was concerned. This was the more noticeable from his being so decidedly above the average in other things.

However, he knew his deficiency, and trusted all pecuniary matters entirely to his wife; and as Vaia, their only child, was but fifteen at the period of his death, he left a proviso in his will that should she marry without her mother's consent, the whole of her fortune, save a beggarly ten thousand pounds, should, *ipso facto*, become Lady Amaranth's absolute property.

Now, in the event of the said clause ever coming into force, it was pretty evident who would become the ultimate gainer; and this was no other than Lady Amaranth's nephew — her late sister's son — the Clarence Hood already spoken of as the destined husband of Vaia.

Her ladyship has for long years cherished this project as the darling plan of her life; yet it is only during the last twelve months that she has breathed a word of it to her daughter, well knowing how unconquerably averse girls almost always are to any matrimonial alliance with which they have nothing to do but obey.

Lady Gertrude Hood, Clarence's mother, had lived almost entirely in France, and she had never been willing to part from her son, who was delicate from his birth; so he had never been to a school or college of any kind, and he and his English relations had only met at more or less rare intervals.

It may here be mentioned that there were all kinds

of stories afloat as to the persistence with which the Hoods clung to a rather remote district in the south of France, where they rented both a rambling and somewhat crumbly old *château* and a snug winter residence in the neighbouring town. The Hood estates in England were, like so many others, fair to see, but almost worthless to their owners from being mortgaged to their utmost value.

These lands joined those which the Temples inherited from the useful but ordinary cotton-spinner; and the chief motive of Lady Amaranth's darling plan of a marriage between the young people was, that she might thereby be the means of rebuilding the broken fortunes of that ancient race.

Why she should be so desirous of benefiting the family into which her favourite sister had happened to marry, we will not pretend to say for certain; but there ran a rumour in Lady Amaranth's circles, some few years ago, that she had married Mr. Temple, who was many years her senior, out of *pique* at Mr. Hood's proposing to Lady Gertrude after having raised hopes of love in her own breast. Be that as it may, she certainly was a gainer by the change.

A woman may, however, live to thank Heaven for such an escape as marrying an invalid, a pauper, or what not; and yet cherish to the grave a romantic, albeit perfectly pure, devotion to him who alone once embodied for her "Love's young dream."

Yes, the Hoods were a very old family indeed; some hinted too old, for there were not wanting tongues to hint that it would have been far better if the Hoods had not married so exclusively among their own caste.

It is curious how reluctant most people are to saying, if asked about the affairs of a given family: "I don't know." Rather than that, they will retail, with some show of credit, the wildest thing they have heard, and upon the weakest authority.

Accordingly, you were assured that the Hoods could only contrive to make ends meet by staying where they were. Others pretended, on the contrary, that money matters had greatly improved with them, and that poor Mr. Hood's state—he was always so distressingly eccentric, you know—was alone the cause of their having to keep so dark; while yet a third version of the affair—— But, really, we will not weary you with any more of such profitless gossip, but return to the living present, leaving the past to speak for itself in such fruit as it shall hereafter bear.

“Well, my dears,” says Lady Amaranth, as she kisses—or rather, allows herself to be kissed, respectfully by—each in turn; “so you have let Clarence run away, have you?”

“Yes, mamma,” said Vaia. “He let out—‘accidentally on purpose,’ I believe, as an Irishwoman said—that he had an appointment at one; so, after that, I insisted on his keeping it.”

“Oh dear, how tiresome!” said her ladyship. “It was only ‘the lawyer’;” and she seated herself by the fire, really vexed.

The house is in Park Lane, and its internal arrangements reveal, not only a high degree of taste and comfort, but these are of a kind which a *grande dame*, and few even of these, can alone produce.

To sum up the effect in a sentence, no expense has been spared, yet nothing reminds one of money.

The boudoir, where the three ladies are met together, is to-day looking its very best, flooded as it is by the early spring sunshine, for its aspect is south-east.

This is Lady Amaranth's first appearance since last night, for she always breakfasts in her own sanctum, which adjoins her bedroom. The meal is a light one, and is not partaken of until the last pin has been deftly placed and an elaborate toilette gone through.

Ten is her hour for sitting down to it in solitary

grandeur ; for never has mortal being been known to share in that repast, sacred to her voluminous correspondence, and the *Morning Post* ! No, not even Vaia, whom she loves in a moderate, fashionable, unexpressed way—not even her departed lord, whom she now mourns on the same calm lines.

Lady Amaranth plumes herself upon being one of the best-dressed women in London—if by that expression be meant that she is always suitably, very charmingly, attired ; but she sets her face determinedly against what she terms “the sinful nonsense” of extreme variety. She is often heard to say that to wear a dress twice or thrice, and then to consider its course has run, is a positive vulgarity, only worthy of a *parvenu*. She, above all, takes pride in the fact, which, by the bye, she keeps strictly to herself and her account book, that her wardrobe never costs her more than four hundred a year, all told.

“Marion, my dear,” she says presently, “I have had another letter from your mamma, which I have just answered. She wants us to go there on the Saturday, which I have promised to do ; so we shall have quite a delightful interval of quiet. The races begin on Tuesday week.”

“Oh, that will be charming,” cried Marion, who, by the bye, has not had another name all this time. We beg her pardon. She is the third daughter and fifth child of Squire and Mrs. Heatherly, of Studfield, near Draycliffe, and has been now some days in Park Lane.

“The invasion takes place on Tuesday.”

“Invasion, my dear ? What a dreadfully inhospitable expression !”

“It doesn't matter, Lady Amaranth ; you and Vaia are not invaders. And do any other intimates come down on the Saturday, does mamma say ?”

“Not a soul, dear, but ourselves ; of course including—including dear Clarence.”

The girls interchanged a rapid glance.

"Marion, play to me a little. Do you mind?"

"Only too delighted. What shall it be?"

"That 'Reverie' of Raff's, as you give me the choice."

"Then I must fetch the music, for I haven't finished learning it by heart."

"Shall I ring and send for it?"

"On no account."

"I fear I tax your good nature in making you give me so much music; but, you see, Vaia does not play."

"Do you know," said Miss Heatherly, turning back her pretty blonde head as she reached the door, "I feel certain she would have played better than any of us, if she had only learnt."

"Alas!" said her ladyship; "and do you know why she was never taught?"

"No, indeed."

"A pretty reason, forsooth; because, at the highly intellectual age of ten, she did not wish it. My poor husband took it as a sign she was to be a—what do the Americans call it?—a scientist, is it not? So *too* absurd. As if the piano ever appeared anything but a means of torture to the average mind of childhood. Run along, dear."

"And yet I cannot help being glad," said Vaia very gently, as the door closed. She had a passionate reverence for her father's memory, and could never hear her mother sneer at his ideas or theories without a feeling of resentment.

"Oh, of course; but why?" said her surviving parent.

"Because I feel sure in the first place I should have given it up by this time, like nine-tenths of my contemporaries."

"More fools they!"

"Possibly; but still they do it; and then, also

because my learning music must have been at the price of leaving out something else, and I know so little as it is." This quite simply.

"Vaia," interrupted her mother, "I wanted to get rid of Marion just to tell you that Clarence will return here at five. He wants to see you alone, and I beg you will not disappoint him."

"I know what you mean, mother," said the girl, looking out of the window.

"Well, naturally; and what then?"

"Well, I wish he would not press me. I have no doubt it will be all right; but—but I really know him so little, especially since we have grown up."

"But I know him so well."

"I thought it was I who was to marry him."

"Well, as we cannot exchange ages and positions, I suppose it is, Vaia. Still, sometimes for a clever woman"—her daughter made a deprecatory gesture—"oh, yes, you are far cleverer than I am, and you know it—for a clever woman, you sometimes say the silliest things; but where were we? Oh, yes, poor Clarence has been telling me that this suspense is simply killing him."

"It doesn't take much then——"

"Nonsense, love. I have, I must say, the greatest confidence in the darling boy's constitution, although his foreign bringing up has hitherto made him delicate. You do not suppose I am recommending you a husband who would convert you into a sick nurse. I should deem such a course most sinful. Sir Magnum Bonum assures me I may be quite easy on that score, and, although I know you think nothing of his opinion——"

"Well, mother, how can I, when he notoriously says to every one exactly what they want to hear!"

"But, dearest, he is one of the Court physicians."

"Perhaps that is why."

"Now you talk like a radical."

"But, mamma, it is not I. They say all the other doctors laugh at him."

"Nothing but jealousy, I assure you."

Here Marion returned with the Raff. Her woman's tact had told her not to make too much haste, suspecting her noble hostess wanted a private word with Vaia; for Miss Heatherly was too good a musician herself to believe in her ladyship's appreciation of the more advanced composers. Moreover, it was patent that for the present, at least, Lady Amaranth Temple had got Clarence Hood on as much brain as she possessed; and you might probably have played Chopin for Raff without her being much the wiser.

It is the commonest failing among middle-aged women to become enslaved, so to speak, by some beardless youth. Ofttimes it is a son, perhaps, singled out of many. This time it chanced to be a nephew. Where such near relationship exists, people chiefly pity the man-boy. Very often the paragon—the idol—is no relation at all, and then the world laughs at the woman.

Somehow or other the fine lady soon appeared to have had enough of the music, good as it was, and to feel more inclined to chat with the fair performer than to listen to her. Besides, she had finished glancing at the *Court Journal*.

"Thank you, dear child, thank you," she said. "I could listen to you for ever, I declare; but—but I mustn't let you tire yourself."

"Oh, it is so good for me to practise."

"Tell me, Marion, who are your party? I should not dream of asking, only your dear mother expressly instructs me so to do, you see. Here is her letter."

Thus urged, Marion twirled herself round on the

music stool, and began—all with the assistance of her fingers, without the aid of which this young person seemed incapable of counting anything but the *tempo* of her pieces.

"Well, I don't know that I can give you a complete list. I don't think mamma can ever tell herself, because, you see, dear papa has such a way of asking any friend he comes across, and very often there isn't room, and——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed both her auditors, and Lady Amaranth went on,—

"So like Joe Heatherly, as every one calls him; but go on—tell us those you do know."

"There are the Bagleys."

"Oh, yes; we met them years ago," said her ladyship. "Does the mother bet as high as ever?"

"Oh, quite; and they say Jessie Bagley is only dying to be married, that she may do the same."

"I dare say. I own I detest sporting ladies as a rule, but the Bagley is an exception. She is so pleasant to play *piquet* with. Perhaps that is the reason. Is the girl pretty?"

"No; but she has such a nice face. It is almost better——"

"And who else? Tell me some of your men."

"Yes, the men; that is the important point," put in Vaia sportively.

"I hope, love," said her mother reprovingly, "that that is a matter of comparative indifference to you now."

"Surely there are other purposes to which pleasant men can be put besides marrying them."

"Go on, dear," said her mother, addressing Miss Heatherly.

"Well, we have Lord Warrington."

"At last!" exclaimed Vaia, clapping her hands.

"Why 'at last,' Vaia?" asked her friend.

"Because he is the man I have always been hear-

ing of, and always am to meet, and have never yet even seen."

"And yet he is quite a friend of mine," quoth the matron of the party. "Why, he dined here only last week when you were at the play with the Croughtons. You see, till a year ago he was a diplomat, and so but little in England. Yes, we are quite friends, as I was with his father before him. Poor fellow! he was telling me all his troubles only the other day."

"Oh, so he has troubles, has he?" said Vaia. "That is interesting. May one know what they are?"

"I don't think Lord Warrington makes any secret about them. His only brother, Augustus de Nares, is the cause of them all. You see, there are ten years' difference in their ages, which makes Augustus, at the present moment—let me see, he must be just twenty-two. I don't think there was ever much love lost between them."

"No!" exclaimed Marion innocently. "You know, like Vaia, I never have seen either of them. But *brothers*!"

"My poor child, it's the commonest case in the world, especially when one is the heir."

"Oh, how dreadful!"

"You'll soon get used to these things when you see a little more of the world. Well, I always tell Warrington that he is jealous because the other is so handsome."

"And what does he say to that?"

"Oh, it makes him quite angry, because he is the very last man to be really so. Were it otherwise, do you suppose I should tease him about it? But the truth is, Augustus has really been too wild for anything. I mean, quite beyond what our world is prepared to forgive in a young man. He has also run through every farthing of his fortune, and poor

Warrington, who is far from well off, is always having to give him money."

"To me it is inconceivable," said Vaia, "that any one—any gentleman, I mean—can ask for money. I would rather turn policeman, or drive a hansom cab."

"Unfortunately, my love, too many so-called gentlemen look upon their relations as their legitimate prey."

"But where can their pride be?"

"If they had any proper pride, they would not reduce themselves to poverty. But if Augustus de Nares ever takes the trouble to excuse himself, even to himself—which I doubt—he probably considers his brother in the light of a father—an individual, that is, whose function in the economy of nature is to supply the Honourable Augustus with such sums as he may please to require."

"I have no objection to a spendthrift——" began Marion.

"My dear child, what are you saying?" exclaimed Lady Amaranth, aghast that any one beneath her roof should give vent to such a sentiment.

"I mean," deprecated the girl blushing, "I was going to say that it does not cause me any very intense indignation that a young fellow should run through his money, provided he immediately exports himself to—say New Zealand, and either makes and brings back another fortune, or remains there for the term of his natural life."

"And do you admire such heroes?" asked her ladyship coldly.

"She means," said Vaia, "that prodigals are often pleasant enough in fiction."

"Of course I mean that too," said Marion; "but I think we should also give them some credit for relieving the dead level—the monotony of real life."

"I know," pursued the matron, "that it is

vulgarly said all women love a scapegrace; and I have only to remark that if that be true, I, for one, am not a woman."

"Luncheon is ready, my lady," announced the portly butler.

"Then come along, children," said Lady Amaranth, with a cheerfulness which showed her to be quite ready for what is essentially the ladies' meal, "and let us relieve the monotony of life with something more substantial than spendthrifts and ne'er-do-weels."

CHAPTER III

A DESPERATE LOVER.

“*Mais je vous dis que non,*” almost shouted Hood, as he took leave of his friend, Count de Turgy, at the corner of Grosvenor Square.

Hood is the Clarence Hood already alluded to, and the two men are on horseback, having brought their unfashionably early ride to an abrupt termination in order that Vaia’s suitor may be punctual for his appointment.

The French Count has been chaffing him unmercifully upon his boasted passion, protesting that Clarence is too young to know what a great love means, and that he will no sooner find himself engaged than he is sure to discover some one he thinks twice as fascinating and beautiful as the belle of his present ardours.

It is in response to some such joke that the above indignant denial had just been launched with kindling eye and quivering lip by Lady Amaranth’s spoiled nephew; and the almost red-haired Saxon, with his fitful colour ever coming and going on the slightest of pretexts—with his very heart in his face, so to speak—forms as strong a contrast as any lover of such things can wish for, to the dead pallor, black hair and beard, and almost stupendous repose of the gallic noble.

Not to chaff Clarence Hood was indeed no easy matter—even before acquaintance with him had progressed far enough to justify such a liberty. The fact was that he “rose,” as the expression is,

in a way that made it an act of almost heroic self-denial not to throw above his head the artificial fly of harmless banter.

With him it always required a second thought to realize that you were not in earnest, and in the case of De Turgy he seldom did so at all. This delighted the Count, who, like so many of his race, was a born actor, and seldom lost a chance of practising his art for his own special amusement upon either man or woman; and in this country he found his old friend Clarence quite a boon in that line, owing to the very few persons—of the male sex, at any rate—who were sufficiently masters of the French tongue to render an exchange of repartee in the least degree exhilarating. As for *Monsieur le Comte's* English, it was—well, very good for a Frenchman, which means that it was very bad indeed. Still, he had become wonderfully popular in English Society; and even his errors of speaking and writing seemed to afford people considerable pleasure, being bandied about with evident gusto.

“Confound him,” growled Clarence, as he rode round to Park Lane. “I’ll be hanged if he hasn’t quite upset me. Too bad, when I told him the interview which awaits me, and upon which probably depends the happiness of my whole life. I’ve a great mind to see my aunt, and get her to postpone——”

But by this time he had dismounted, and was in the hall—had, moreover, heard a footman inform a visitor that her ladyship was “out.”

“Oh,” he told himself, suddenly changing his mind—“all the better. I can bear this terrible suspense no longer, and if I am to be refused merely because I appear before my cousin at a moment when I don’t happen to be perfectly cool and comfortable, why then—then she would probably not say what I want her to say in any case. What! Refuse to promise to be mine? No, no, I could

not bear that. I will not think of it"; and he fairly shuddered at the thought.

He was shown into the same room in which the three ladies had been chatting away the morning, and there he was kept waiting some little time, to his sore annoyance.

In that quarter of an hour he sat down and rose at least twenty times, and opened as many books, or glanced at newspapers—not one word of which ever got nearer to his understanding than the *retina* of his eye.

He alternately walked to the windows, and turned from them with disgust to gaze on the door where he expected Vaia to enter. Several times he thought of ringing the bell to inquire whether Miss Temple had been duly informed of his arrival, but he as often checked himself, thinking he would give her a few minutes more.

Presently he happened to catch sight of the clock, and then the cause of his having to wait became partially explained. He was a good ten minutes before his time.

At last, however, there was a rustle outside, the handle of the door turned, and the young lady of his thoughts appeared.

She looked perfectly calm and collected; and if her lovely face bore any unwonted expression, it was one of being slightly vexed. She was also, perhaps, a shade or two paler than usual.

The young man advanced eagerly towards her, seized both her hands, and drew her into the room, exclaiming as he did so,—

"Oh, Vaia, how you have kept me waiting!"

"Had not one of us better shut the door?" she inquired, with an amused smile at his vehemence. "Of course it is quite understood what you have come for on this special occasion; and unless you wish the servants to hear——"

He closed the door almost violently, while Vaia advanced into the room and sat down on an ottoman. He rushed for a footstool—not for her, he knew she detested such officiousness on his part—upon which he seated himself at her feet. To take a chair, or even sit beside her, would have seemed to this *exalté* wooer far too prosaic for his present mood. As he sat there, his left elbow on the ottoman, his face—now paler than her own—turned up towards her with a wild expression in his deep grey eyes, almost terrible in its intensity, the girl told herself that although *she* might be indifferent to his beauty, he was undeniably very handsome, albeit in a peculiar style, and there suddenly came over her a strange pity, both for herself and him, which she had not felt before.

“Well, Vaia,” he said, speaking slowly and low, though with evident restraint—“a week ago—it appears to me a hundred years—you asked me for a week before you should bind yourself to me by a solemn promise. It was, perhaps, hard on your part, having known for some weeks of my hopes, and being aware also how heartily I was supported by your dear mother when I asked you to be my wife—my queen. I have now come for your answer—my sentence.”

And such was the poor boy's emotion as he managed to get out these few words, that every muscle of his countenance twitched convulsively, and drops of anguish stood upon his brow.

“Now listen to me, Clarence,” said Vaia, after a short pause; “and oh, do listen with some little calmness, if you can.”

But he interrupted her.

“What! You are not going to cast me off?”

“I shall if you drive me to it—as you seem bent on doing at this moment—most certainly.”

His manner changed as if by magic.

"There, there! I will be calm—quite reasonable! Forgive the interruption, but you are far from dreaming—you can never know—what these next few moments mean to me. Speak!"

"I know you are speaking from your heart; indeed, I feel you to be quite sincere and truthful, not only with me, but always, and with all the world. I know you admire and love me beyond measure, and I am flattered by it. To lose no time in setting your mind at rest, I will tell you at once that I have no intention of refusing you."

"Heaven bless you for those words!" gasped the poor youth, utterly unable to restrain himself for joy.

"But what I am going to do," she went on, "is to try and persuade you that it is for your own good and happiness if I ask you not exactly to give me up, but to take a reasonable time to consider the matter farther."

"But what should change me?"

"That is just what I am coming to. I do not know whether you wish me to be your wife if I cannot love you?"

His countenance fell, and a perplexed look came over it as he asked,—

"So that, till now, you have felt no response in your heart in answer to my great love?"

"No, Clarence! It is kinder and more honourable to be quite candid—not to allow you to go on under even a shadow of delusion. Any love for you that I may have is simply that of a cousin—a sister if you will."

"Of course," he said, in an almost heart-broken voice, "this is very bitter for me to hear. I had hoped—— You know they say 'Love begets love.'"

"It would have been far worse if you had found out after marriage that I could never return your love as you would desire."

There was a pause, during which Clarence, without moving from where he was, gazed out through the window at the bright April sky. He apparently found there the hope he sought, for presently he said, turning his eyes once more upon Vaia,—

"I will take my chance. Mine you shall be at all hazards."

The girl looked disappointed.

"I do not like your saying that," she said gravely.

"But if I cannot live without you, what choice have I?"

"A very noble one—self-sacrifice! Are you not, just now, thinking more of yourself than of me? Try to throw yourself into the future. Imagine that you and I have joined our lot, and that, in spite of my warning, you have persisted in the hope that I should grow to love you as—well, as I feel sure many and many another girl might. Some fatal day you awake from your dream, and feel that never, never can you be happy again."

"I will chance it," he said doggedly.

The blood mounted to her cheeks, but what brought it there was naught but a growing sense of indignation. He saw the change, and at once took alarm.

"Vaia," he pleaded, "you cannot know for certain that you would not fall in love with me as your husband."

"Oh, only too well," she returned, with deep emotion. "But that is not in itself the worst. Listen! If you agree to give me up, I shall marry some one else——"

"Whom you *can* love?"

"No more than I can love you."

The young man's face brightened at once.

"I do not say," she pursued, "that I may not prefer him—think him much better suited to me than you, Clarence; but love! no, I am not absolutely

sure—it were presumption to go so far as that. I am not so certain as—as I am of what I have told you about my feeling towards you, for instance ; but I do say, that with you left out of the question, the days when I looked for, or expected to feel, the weal and woe of *love*, are gone for ever.”

She then informed him of much which she had previously confessed to Marion. Of course the boy-lover was not to be convinced. If love is generally blind, he is so beyond everything with regard to argument. He declared his cousin was simply in a morbid state, in which conviction he was very likely right ; told her she was the dupe of depression, and ended by saying, with quite a sanguine air,—

“For the very life of me, Vaia, I cannot make out what, if you mean to marry, and can never love, should prevent your becoming my wife as well as the wife of another man !”

“And yet, my poor Clarence, the thing is so very simple. I don’t want to become miserable myself by being the wife of a miserable man, which I tell you, you will infallibly be if that very high ideal of wedded love which you now believe in should turn out too late to be a mere bubble ; solely and entirely because, like an un-reasoning child, you will persist in having your own way, in spite of the warning which I give you with such heartfelt conviction.”

Clarence rose from the footstool, and threw himself beside her on the ottoman.

“And yet if I insist, you will be mine ?” he said, taking her hand, and making an ineffectual attempt to pass his arm round her waist.

“Yes,” she said, after a moment’s hesitation ; “I will bind myself, but I will not bind you. I *will* have my way in this. *You* now shall take a week to ponder over what I have told you, and if at the end of that time you still really wish it—as

mamma is so bent upon having you for a son-in-law, as well as for a nephew——”

“Is that a promise?” he asked, all in a tremble of emotion.

“There is my hand upon it,” said Vaia, withdrawing hers for a moment from her lover’s palm, that she might place it there again.

“And will you not seal that sweet vow with a kiss?” he asked, bending towards her. But she sprang up lightly from his side.

“By no means,” she said, in a tone which strove to be playful. “The compact cannot now be actually binding for a whole week longer, and during the interval I will have you do nothing that could possibly interfere with your complete sense of freedom. See!” she continued, “mamma evidently thinks our council of war has lasted long enough, for here they are just driving up to the door. Let us run down and meet them in the hall, or they may fear to disturb us.”

And so saying, Vaia tripped across the room, catching her swain’s hand as she did so, and the pair ran rapidly downstairs.

“Dear me, they have some one with them,” she exclaimed, on seeing a stranger with the two ladies. “Do you know who it is?” she asked of Clarence.

“That?” replied the youth, carelessly, his thoughts still all engrossed by the momentous interview. “Oh, that is Lord Warrington.”

At the same instant Lady Amaranth called to her daughter,—

“Vaia, here is Lord Warrington, whom you were saying this morning you had never met.”

And so the introduction took place. His lordship was, in truth, as Lady Amaranth had said, less handsome than his harem-scarem brother—so far, that is, as mere regularity of features, and, of course, the bloom of early youth, were concerned; but to any

good judge his appearance was, on the whole, what may be termed far more satisfactory. He was pleasanter to contemplate than the more showy Augustus. What though the lines of thought were on his calm and noble face; what though his eyes were a size smaller and far less fiery than his reckless youngster of a brother's! There was a dignity all unsought in his every look and movement; and you said to yourself at a first glance, "I would lend that man my purse, though I met him in rags at a prize-fight."

It was, indeed, something much akin to this which Vaia Temple inwardly told herself as she shook hands for the first time with her mother's old friend; and the two looked at each other in the eyes for a second longer than is usually the custom on these occasions — Lord Warrington, because he was always deeply impressed by beauty, beheld for the first time in either art or nature; Vaia, because this new-comer athwart the pathway of her discouraged life struck her in a way no man had ever done before.

But it is a case where analysis escapes us as definition fails. There is only one word to describe the undue, almost grotesque, ascendancy which, without in the least desiring it, Hector de Nares, Lord Warrington, from the first moment acquired over Vaia Temple—he was her *Fate*!

Happily, but few of us are susceptible of so doubtful a blessing as now befel her. Few of us are so constituted; and we thank our strong minds, while it is Heaven alone we ought to be grateful to, since it is Providence that prevents us from becoming the victim all in an instant of—of what? Of an erring and most fallible human being like ourselves, perhaps inferior even to ourselves; and we all know what that means! For now and all time—for better or for worse.

And yet, by a kind of contradiction, by some irony of destiny, it is for the most part the strong in other moral respects who are the least able to resist this overshadowing of themselves, body and soul, by another. That such cases exist, no one who knows anything of human nature will deny; and psychologists, we believe, label the phenomena as the mesmerism of love. Now, it is said that a strong mesmerist can never himself be mesmerised; and probably in the same way, an individual who can inspire so helpless, so abject a feeling as Lord Warrington did in this girl, is proof against so strange an accident happening to himself, either at his undesired victim's hands, or at any other's. It is superfluous to admit that men and women very frequently fall mutually in love, almost at first sight, or rather, they experience a powerful sense of being greatly fascinated from their earliest meeting. That is a faint and shadowy result compared to what befel Vaia on this fatal day. It was a change, radical and permanent, and yet occurring amidst the most commonplace surroundings; indebted for its intensity to no thrilling adventure, romantic peril, or hair-breadth rescue, such as might plausibly account to the sceptical for stamping a hero's image indelibly upon the mind of an impressionable girl, none the more love-proof because she had declared herself as securely wrapped in the cold armour of indifference.

"Come up, Warrington," said Lady Amaranth, "and have some tea. Here, you shall carry this for me, then I know it won't get broken," and she placed within his taper fingers, guiltless of even a single ring, some brittle bauble which had taken her fancy.

Nothing loth—for, truth to say, this young lord was ever prone to linger where a fair damsel, and all the more where two of them were to be found,

especially when they had no one but him to attend to—he obeyed without demur, and soon the whole party were discussing tea and thin bread and butter in the large drawing-room. Warrington had known Clarence Hood from a boy, and it had never yet crossed his mind to regard him in any other light.

“We have been to see the Van Schuyler wedding presents. What jewels!”

“Yes,” said Hector; “Crantz, the jeweller, showed me most of them yesterday. You know he had the resetting of the old stones.”

“They are quite lovely,” said Marion. “Do you not think so?”

“Well, I am no judge.”

“No judge! Well, this is the first time I ever heard you make such an admission about anything.”

“Thanks,” he said, smiling, “for the implied rap to my conceit. It is true all the same. Believe me, we are seldom judges of anything we do not care for.”

“And do you not care for jewels?” put in Vaia, speaking for the first time, and in a voice which was awed, partly by the sentiment—for every true woman worships gems, and holds as profane any word that would disparage them—but more awed by the speaker.

“For jewels in general, yes—more, I think, than most men; but the Van Schuyler *parures* are nearly all diamonds, and they are stones I positively dislike.”

“Dislike diamonds!” gasped the three ladies, in scandalized chorus. “But why?”

“Ah, that I can only guess. There is the fact—they displease me. I suspect the reason is chiefly from association, for at one time I used to like them. It was in America I first took a dislike to them, seeing them so much worn with high

dressess, and even in the daytime. Then I found on my return, that although our greatest ladies, beginning with royalty, still wear them——”

“Still, indeed!” put in Lady Amaranth. “They are the unvarying badge of the *nouveau riche*. Who ever knew a stockbroker’s wife begin with a tiara of emeralds, for instance?”

“Young ladies,” said the matron of the party, “it is most desirable you should take note of this, and spread the direful decree among your friends. Evidently the future Lady Warrington — poor woman—will not have a diamond to bless herself with.”

Why does Vaia blush scarlet at these words—she who is not used to blushing?

Presently Marion was made to play—this time on the grand piano—and Hector forced to listen and criticise her. He made no show of not being competent now. He even, on being pressed, pointed out two places where her reading of Brahms might be altered. But what mattered it all to Vaia? Had he loved diamonds, and known nothing of crescendo and staccato, what difference would it have made? What *he* did was right, because he did it. Strange that so light a reason should weigh heaviest of all! Just as each of us is constantly finding that certain of our acquaintances—sometimes even relations—can never do right in our eyes, and rarely open their lips without irritating us, although they might be striving their best to propitiate and please; so Vaia felt that her new prince enjoyed the regal privilege that he could do no wrong. Needless to say that when Lord Warrington took his leave half an hour later, poor Vaia had but a very misty and confused idea of what had happened to her. She was as yet far from dreaming that she already loved, that she had lost her liberty; no, she felt simply dazed. She

wanted to be alone and to think ; she was puzzled, uncomfortable, rather frightened ; she knew not why — and yet there was something beyond or behind the mist—a shadow, a vague form, or was it a kindred ? or if not a kindred, an enticing spirit, —like the promise of a great coming joy.

As she at last fell asleep that night, it was with a new-born suspicion, unlike anything she had felt for many and many a long day, that haply after all she could no longer exclaim with the poet,—

“The day of my destiny’s over,
And the star of my fate hath declined !”

CHAPTER IV

THE RAVISHER.

HECTOR, Lord Warrington, sits in his smoking-room on the following morning, enjoying his first cigar after a late, solitary, but excellent breakfast. He is absorbed in the morning paper.

Alone, and at home! What a good moment to pry in upon a man, and dissect him both bodily and mentally. But first let us glance at his surroundings.

The house is in Curzon Street, and his lordship holds it on a long lease. It is not only comfortable and well furnished, but it is creditably full of admirable pictures—all of small or moderate size, for the abode is not a large one—statuettes, carvings, *bibelots*, and curiosities. When we consider that his income but little exceeds three thousand a year—to spend, that is to say, for the rest only counts when a man is proposing to a great heiress—and furthermore, that Hector inherited very few of these treasures, it argues highly for his critical judgment, as well as for his expertness in the difficult art of buying to advantage.

The house looks north, and this smoking-room where we now find him is at the back. It has, so to speak, no southern wall, as the present occupant, on taking possession some six years before, had removed almost the whole of that article, and built a large conservatory beyond. At night a pair of large and ingeniously contrived glass—well, they are more like screens than doors—are unfolded from the sides, locked in the centre, and heavy curtains

are then drawn across. The almost entire absence of wall is then unsuspected, and the room, except perhaps for its great height, without which a conservatory, however diaphanous, would render it too dark in the day-time, becomes a thoroughly comfortable one even in winter. At all seasons the supply of flowers in this outer edifice is abundant and choice, coming up to Town at regular intervals from Chilleigh, Hector's country place in Buckinghamshire, which, he says, and truly, produces so little besides that he cannot afford to live there. When all is said, there is a certain undeniable charm, even for a peer of the realm, in not being so wealthy as to become indifferent as to what things cost, since he would lose then, by the zest of contrivance and management, the satisfaction of pluming himself upon making a little go farther than other people can. He would also forfeit the sweet self-complacency which a charitable action or other pecuniary sacrifice produces.

It must be confessed, however, that sacrifices of any kind are hardly in Lord Warrington's line; and, indeed, he lays claim to no higher rule of life than what he terms an enlightened selfishness.

In religion it has never been known what his views are, or whether he has any at all. If staying with friends in the country, he attends whatever place of worship his host happens to patronize. In London he goes about twice a year to listen to the boys' voices at St. Paul's, or the Abbey; and now and then drops in for the Romish rite of Benediction, as it is called, either at Farm Street or the Oratory. He never swears or speaks profanely in any company, though this may be nothing but pagan refinement and well-bred good taste. In all the pagan virtues, indeed, his lordship may be allowed to excel, and as that is certainly the main point as far as mere outward acquaintance is concerned, this

son of fashion is highly popular both with men and women, at clubs and in drawing-rooms.

It is chiefly idiots who dislike him, and certainly he returns the compliment.

Hector is two-and-thirty, but has taken such good care of himself that he does not look his age by a good five years. His countenance is refined and intellectual, with indications of more passion than feeling, but belonging exclusively, with its sanguine bronze colouring, to the privileged few who inherit constitutions of iron.

It has long been a moot point among even his best friends as to how much heart he possesses, some declaring that though Hector is the most genial and pleasant of men, that commodity was forgotten by the good fairy at his christening; while others, with equal vehemence, maintain that a better-hearted fellow never breathed. To be sure that wag, little Orcherley, said once, when the subject was being discussed, that Hector's heart was of splendid quality, but there was not much of it. Then we all know Orcherley will say anything for an epigram. Another of his set—an eccentric, but a philosopher, who is admitted occasionally to make wonderful shots, declares that Warrington has by far the largest, best, and most sensitive heart, naturally, with which Heaven ever endowed mortal—so large, in fact, that he, long ago, discovered the absolute necessity of hiding it away from the world and ignoring it himself, shutting his ears to all its louder dictates, and this as an absolute condition of his own existence. It was, according to this sage, a case of the man resolutely snubbing his heart or being swamped by it.

Which of these violently opposed views regarding this very pleasant young man is correct, or if either of them is, let his own words and acts declare.

Ever and anon, as he reads his *Times* to-day, he looks up, blows away the intervening clouds of blue smoke, and rests his eye for a second or two upon one or other of his pictures, and sometimes he turns his head to view the gaudy variety of the greenhouse treasures, so attractive and gladsome do all things look in the recently arrived spring sunshine. And Hector forgets his troubles, if he has any, and is what he looks—as contented and happy a man as any in Mayfair.

Of course fate instantly resists this luxury so rarely dealt out to mortals.

“Rat-tat!” goes the postman, and a moment later, Baines, the only male indoor servant, brings in a letter of thin bulk and foreign post-mark.

After the master has glanced at it, the valet says,—

“There was a man come yesterday, my lord, as you were out—a man with a picture—and he wants to know when you’d be in.”

“Did he say from whom he came?”

“No, my lord.”

“What—what kind of picture was it? Did you see it?”

“Well, my lord, I don’t pretend to have no knowledge of these things, but I didn’t think anything of it—a kind of chromo I should a’ called it.”

“If he comes again——”

“He said he’d return this morning, my lord.”

“Well, send him away; and tell me, Baines, did you go to the builder?”

“Yes, my lord. He says next door won’t be finished and the hoarding down before another six weeks.”

“Ah, so I feared!”

When the servant had retired, Lord Warrington opened the foreign letter, and as he read it, his countenance fell.

"That confounded brother of mine again!" he soliloquized, throwing the epistle into the grate. "The young ass! how I do hate an ass! O Lord, how I do hate one to be sure—wouldn't let me take care of his money for him, though I offered, knowing the young beggar, to pay him five per cent. for his ten thousand, which only brought in three and a half. I knew it would come cheaper in the end. No; he must have it all 'liquid,' as he called it in his vile slang. Lord, how I do hate slang! and it lasts him—what with the turf, baccarat, and other things—exactly two years and a quarter, and then—though I know he hates me like poison—Augustus comes and says he is very sorry, but, 'to dig he is not able, to beg he is ashamed,'—the old story—and coolly inquires whether I intend to let him starve, or would rather he didn't! No; I never could stand the only other child of my parents! We never hit it off from the first. To be sure he is ten years my junior; yet I might have liked him well enough if he had been—well, another kind of fellow. I really am very fond of some fellows; but I have no sympathy with recklessness. I don't gamble. I play, and make by it; and why? Because I have taken far more pains over cards than the men I play with—than most of them, that is. The rest, those like myself, on the long run, win as I do.

"Help him! of course I must; but to what extent, in what manner, and, above all, how often? You might as well try to slake a drunkard's thirst as to satisfy Augustus. Coolness and impudence may be very attractive sometimes. I like the former in Charles Wyndham's acting—the latter, in Mrs. Bagley's Skye terrier; but they don't somehow set gracefully upon my brother, and—confound him!—heir-presumptive!"

It has been said that his lordship was no

swearer, but he did sometimes indulge in that sedative to a mild extent when alone.

"Yes," he pursued; "his impertinence would be priceless were it a marketable commodity. His pet theme of conversation with me is, that owing to the gap, as he calls it, in our ages, he is pretty sure to have his innings sooner or later. He is good enough to express his opinion that I haven't got it in me to marry, although he is too sharp to attribute this forbearance on my part to any consideration for himself. Of course I always tell him that I intend to marry, and that soon; but shall I? It certainly is a duty I owe my country to save her from so powerful an argument against that admirable institution, the House of Lords, as my precious brother would infallibly supply were he ever to become a peer. Marriage? I wonder what I should think of it after a fair trial—say a couple of years! Sometimes it appears to me a little heaven on earth; at others—bah! it is a subject no bachelor can judge of, and once a husband, your opinion don't matter. For as Chaucer says,—

'Marriage is such a rabble rout,
They that are out want to get in,
They that are in want to get out.'

By the bye, I wonder if Larochevoucauld had ever heard that when he wrote his celebrated epigram embodying the same idea?

"Marry! But whom? I fancy thereon depends all the difference in married life."

And straightway his thoughts reverted to Vaia Temple.

"Why not?" he asked himself. "I am much pleased with Lady Amaranth's daughter—very much so indeed. Downright interesting, I declare, and one of the handsomest girls in England. Naturally,

I am not in a position to marry without money, and she has that and to spare. She is richer than I am now, and will have more than twice as much some day. I am not the man to sell myself, but this is no case of that sort. Why, I declare, the letter is not burned after all. I was so disgusted that I pitched it away half read."

So saying, he picked the crumpled sheet out of the fender with the tongs, smoothed it out, and read as follows :—

"MONTE CARLO.

"DEAR BROTHER, AND HEAD OF THIS FAMILY OF TWO,—

"I fear my handwriting will hardly send a thrill of joy through your august frame. I know, indeed, that my letters are somewhat monotonous, if never very long, and I sincerely wish I knew how to import into them something of that pleasing variety which you contrive to attain in the style of your many written, as well as extempore, sermons to me, though even in these it must be noted that the text is always the same.

"Then I am not one of my country's hereditary orators yet!

"I have got no money, and owe a stiffish bill at this hotel. I suppose, unless you send me a hundred or so, I shall be put in prison, which you might think a bore. I am quite as sorry as you are, but I assure you it is not in the least my fault. You, I know, enjoy almost invariable good luck at play; at least, so fellows tell me. I dis-enjoy the worst possible. I have lost almost every day, either at the *trente et quarante* table here, or at the club at Nice, playing baccarat.

"I'll tell you what I'll do for you, if you get me out of this—and really, seeing our mutual positions, I don't see how you can very well help it—I will come straight home and fulfil my engagement to stay at Studfield, and ride Rickety for Heatherly

at Draycliffe on the 22nd. There now, I can't say handsomer than that.

"Yours,

"AUG. DE NARES."

"So he's to be there, is he?" groaned the peer. "Then I've a great mind not to go."

At that moment the valet entered the room, and presenting a dirty card to his master, said,—

"The man with the picture, my lord."

"But I told you to say ——" began Hector, who was in no mood to be bothered.

"Beg pardon, but I told him what your lordship said; and he asked me to give you this."

The card bore the following words, written in ink, in a stiff business hand:—

"From Mr. Schippmann, with a painting for Lord Warrington's inspection."

Now Schippmann was one of the first of those London dealers who confine their transactions mainly to foreign pictures, be they ancient or modern. He was an intelligent and highly respectable man, and Lord Warrington had bought more than one picture from him.

"Schippmann!" he said, in some surprise, as he read the card; "I never before knew him to—— But show the man in, Baines."

"Why does he not request me to call as usual, I wonder?" mused his lordship, while the servant went to usher in the new-comer.

When the latter appeared, Hector's surprise was by no means allayed. The first thought which flashed across his practised mind was,—

"He's not in the business," and it was not only the fellow's suspiciously cropped hair which at once suggested the criminal classes to the peer's prudence.

Yet he was a plausible villain enough, if villain

he were. Bowing and cringing with every step of his powerful frame as he advanced, picture in hand, into the room—most subservient, abject in his over anxiety to be civil and to propitiate.

“I axis yer parding, my lordship, fur disturbing of yer; but Mr. Shipman,” as he pronounced it, “ee were in such an hurry as your honor shud see this perticler fine old paintin’ afore no one else.”

“Very well, I will look at it. Do not leave the room, Baines; we—we may want your assistance;” this as the valet was about to retire.

There were an unusual number of large medals and other silver articles strewed about on the shelves and tables, without any kind of protection; and it struck Warrington pretty forcibly that this might be among the occasions when “two heads, each with a pair of keen eyes in it, were probably better than one.”

Having desired the “convict,” as he already mentally called the man, to remove the very dirty linen cloth in which the picture was enveloped, and to place the latter upon a chair in a good light, Hector proceeded to examine it. Although unused to “wear his heart upon his sleeve,” he could not restrain a slight start as he took his first glance—that flash of the experienced eye—which is sometimes so unerring, that it was currently believed of a celebrated expert, now some years dead, that he could walk at a moderate pace between the two picture-covered walls of an exhibition for the first time, and be certain to pass no single work of exceptional merit without noting it.

Lord Warrington laid claim to no such marvellous gift; but he had seen most of the finest collections in Europe, and knew the chief galleries of his own country almost by heart. However, he checked himself from uttering what was on his lips, and said instead,—

"Why, my man, you cannot know much about pictures!"

"How's that, your lordship? Yer can't go fer ter say as that ain't a real one!"

"Or you would not place this one in a contrary light," pursued the peer, disregarding the interruption. "Were you in the business, the first thing you would have been taught, is that the light must come from the same side as the artist saw it upon."

The man officiously turned the chair, so that the frame faced the conservatory.

"No; that is not right, either," said Warrington, half amused, as he himself placed it so that the light fell upon the painting sideways from the left. It was a small "cattle" piece, mellow, but fresh in colour, and in the best preservation—in fact, a gem of high price; but the frame did not fit it: was of false or dutch gold, as frame-makers express it, and in the worst possible taste. In the centre underneath, and evidently of recent date, was painted in common black letters, "Adrian Van de Velde."

Warrington was much interested in his examination, doubtless to the great satisfaction of this strange picture-vendor. Apparently forgetting, in his pre-occupation, his wish for Baines' presence, he presently sent his valet to the drawing-room for a magnifying glass, meanwhile he moved the chair once more, and into a position still nearer what did duty for a window. He then knelt down, and, shading his eyes with the left hand, became absorbed for a few moments in the study of the undoubtedly fine work.

Suddenly he remembered his suspicions, and that he had momentarily forgotten alike the presence of his ill-favoured visitor and the absence of his trusty attendant. Turning now with a suddenness which he rightly divined would take the man by surprise, he was himself not a little startled to

find that the latter, instead of bestowing his delicate attentions upon any of the valuables, had lightly stepped out into the conservatory; and, at the moment Warrington first caught sight of him, his head was thrown back, and his eyes were cast up with evident interest, upon the house next door, the rebuilding of which had reached the third storey. But the next instant the fellow affected to be engrossed in the perfume of a rare exotic.

"'Scuse me, honourable," says the man, "but I does love the pretty flowers that wonderful. Hiver since I sot as a little 'un on my poor old gran'-mother's knee, time when I was no 'igher nor that, as I've 'eared 'er a tellin' folks as little Chummie—that wur me, savin' the liberty—'ud rather 'ave a little posy o' wild flowers nor his dinner."

"No, really!" said the peer, who was an appreciator of most of the fine arts besides painting; lying, albeit he never cultivated it himself, being of the number.

Baines here returned with the glass, or *loupe*, as the French call it; and after using it for a still more minute inspection than he had yet made—for it is more difficult to detect a fine copy in the case of these Dutch "cattle" pieces of cabinet size than perhaps in any other school of painting—he said to the fellow, who seemed to have now torn himself away from the flowers,—

"And what do you want—I mean, what did Mr. Schippmann tell you to ask for this?"

"Well, yer sees, my lordship, it be this ways. My brother as is in the coal business at Mile End, 'ee 'ave took this pictur' hoaf a gent for a bad debt, and my brother—bein' a busy man like, and no way inclined for ter keep it hissel', 'ee arks me to sell it for 'un—me being allus willin' ter gain a honest penny, bein' out o' reg'lar work, an' 'avin' a wife and fower young 'uns ter take care

on. I takes this 'ere pictur' to Mr. Schippmann's, as a pal o' mine as is in the furniture line tells me on' as likely fer ter buy 'un. Well, I seed 'un yesterday aforenoon, an' 'ee says as 'ee can't buy it 'isself; but 'ee sends me to yer honour as the most likeliest gent—leastways, my lord, as 'ee can think on fer ter buy it 'orf me."

This long speech was not got through without much painful twisting and untwisting of a mangy-looking fur cap which the man held in both hands the while, and at which he kept casting frequent furtive glances, as if in search of information.

"Then does Mr. Schippmann know nothing about either you or your picture?"

"Oh, bless yer, yes, yer lord. I took a recommendation to 'un reg'lar."

"And where did you get it from?"

"Why, my honourable, horf my pal in the furniture line, as 'as 'ad dealings with 'un frequent."

"And the price? What do you want for the picture?"

"Well, lordship, Mr. Schippmann he ses it's worth hevery bit of fifty pounds."

"Fifty pounds!" said the peer, in a tone of surprise he could not conceal.

But the would-be seller took his astonishment in an inverted sense.

"Well, my lord, if yer thinks it too much, see 'ere. My brother, 'ee wants thirty-five quid in a mortal 'urry, to make up a payment as must be made to-day; so, if yer likes to take it for that, I'll write yer hout a receipt, an' leave the paintin' "

"My good man," said Warrington, "I don't do business in such a hurry. If you like to leave the picture till I have seen Mr. Schippmann, I have no doubt we shall come to terms."

But the proposal did not appear to suit the fellow at all.

"Well, sir," he said, forgetting, it would seem, the nobleman's rank for the moment, "if we can't make a bargain on it horf 'and, I must try and find another customer;" and he prepared to take up the Van de Velde.

"Stop!" said Warrington rising. "Touch that picture at your peril. I knew it from the first as one of several which were stolen last year from Lord Farnworth's place in Berkshire."

An evil gleam of mingled rage and malice shot up at him for an instant from beneath the ruffian's lowering brow; and though Hector was no coward, he blessed his forethought in keeping Baines in the room.

Then the man drew himself up, and, throwing off every vestige of his former obsequious manner, said fiercely,—

"What's that to me, shud like ter know? 'Ow's us ter tell where folks gets their things from? I ain't afeared. We come honest by this 'ere picter, an' if yer won't pay for it, why, I takes it away; an' I'll make short work of any as 'll 'inder me!"

He was simply ferocious as he said this, and again he attempted to seize what he claimed.

Lord Warrington's blood, however, was by this time fairly up. Walking over to a cabinet, he took out a small gleaming article, and, pointing it at the scoundrel, who had already the picture snugly under his arm, while Baines hastened to guard the door, said very quietly,—

"If you move one inch, I fire. This revolver has five chambers, all loaded. I shall only shoot you in the legs; but it is possible you may not even desire that. Baines, fetch a policeman."

The servant opened the door to obey; but at the bare mention of the criminal's blue devil, the man flung down the Van de Velde as if it were dirt;

almost overturned the dignified valet as he rushed past him into the passage; and opening the front door for himself, and slamming it after him, took to his heels, and was round the first corner long before it was possible for Warrington to give the alarm, or set "the force" upon the scoundrel's track.

CHAPTER V.

STUDFIELD.

THE Heatherlys of Studfield are an almost typical county family—old as the soil, of large rent-roll but embarrassed means, hospitable, countrified, prolific.

The present possessor, Mr. Joseph Heatherly, or Squire Joe, as he is universally called, has all the virtues and most of the failings of his class. A model paterfamilias, a staunch Churchman, a devoted sportsman—for the Studfield harriers are a tradition, and he hunts the fox assiduously as well. He is also amusingly narrow-minded, and ridiculously happy in being so; an M.P. who never opens his mouth in the House, and seldom shuts it when out of it; an easy landlord, a warm friend, an obstinate enemy, and quite the worst magistrate in Great Britain and Ireland.

His wife, however, thinks him perfect—so fortunate for her, poor woman! And not only his girls, but what is less common, his grown-up sons—Tom, Jack, and Harry—adore him. They get into scrapes, and the “governor” blows their heads off, of course; but at the first big fence taken, or brilliant shot made by the culprit, delinquency and error are at once forgotten in the enthusiasm of paternal pride, and not another word is said upon the matter *until next time*.

Studfield, as its archives show, was rebuilt in 1547, having been knocked to pieces during the Wars of the Roses, and has remained in an almost tottering state during the interval. No respect has

been shown, it must be confessed, for the purity of its Tudor type, by the various Heatherlys who have at intervals required more accommodation; and whole blocks and wings, in the taste of the early Georges of the Italian palazzo, and in no taste at all, have been ruthlessly added to it at the caprice of any tenant for life who happened to imagine—quite erroneously, for the most part—that the estate could well afford him more elbow room.

Most of these monstrosities were, to be sure, decently hid away among the numerous trees in which the mansion was embowered; the original, —as rebuilt, that is, in 1547—or central portion of it, being alone clearly visible from the main approach—a drive of full a mile and a half from the ancient castellated lodge gates, which wove its graceful way ever upward through an undulating deer-park, rich in fern and bracken, till it reached the commanding eminence crowned by the cradle of the Heatherlys, with both picturesque and imposing effect.

Such is the scene without—made bright by sunshine—upon the day when a large and merry party have met to enjoy the long-famed hospitalities of Studfield, on the occasion of a steeple-chase meeting at Draycliffe—some seven miles distant. Most of the guests have but just arrived from town, and others—it is only five in the afternoon—will come by the later train, which but gives them scant time to adorn for dinner.

“But surely,” a stranger would exclaim, “there can’t be any more people coming! Why, mercy on us, where will they all sleep? On the dining-room table, or—as their grandfathers did in the good old time—under it?”

And no wonder! For on the present occasion the Heatherlys are all at home; indeed, it is a family rule never to thoroughly enjoy a festive

gathering if any of their vast number are away. These affectionate parents have never buried a single child, and in the number of their love pledges they distance, to use a sporting phrase, the impetuous Irish major who, answering the question of a royal personage as to the number of his offspring, averred that he had "Better than a dozen," which, on counting heads, proved to mean eleven. Very far better, we should say, for the Heatherly olive branches already attain the proud total of fourteen.

Not to attempt a complete catalogue, which is always rather a trial, even in Homer, we may point out that of the three more or less grown-up young gentlemen, already referred to by their brief and homely names, Jack is the oldest of the family, and is just of age. Annie and Mary, the two girls "out," are aged nineteen and twenty; then comes a boy, and the seventeen-year-old one is our acquaintance Marion, Vaia's great friend, and admittedly the beauty of the family.

After her there is a slight gap in the ladder, reminding one of a breathing space, and then the line is dotted with about an equal number of knickerbockers and little skirts, until we arrive at the long robes of a very good baby boy, the youngest of all.

Mrs. Heatherly is now sitting in a spruce little lawn tent or pavilion at one side of the vast lawn. Grass is a prime feature of Studfield. Lawn tennis, it is superfluous to remark, is in full swing, while evidently none of the smaller girls will play anything but real cricket—no paltry bat-and-ball business—probably with the idea that it gives them standing with the boys.

Squire Joe is boisterous over a game of bowls with the parson and the local doctor, while the very small ones of the party, despite the earliness

of the season and the efforts of French and English governesses—the former quite a pretty girl—and an uncertain number of nurses, insist upon turning Nature's green carpet to the more primitive use of rolling upon it incessantly with as much kicking in the air as they can possibly combine with it.

There is, of course, plenty of laughter and merry shouting, while the birds sing shrilly in the trees.

That highly coloured girl in green tartan, strolling round the shrubbery with Lord Warington, is Miss Bagley, daughter of her betting, piquet-playing ladyship; while that wonderfully good-looking young fellow in flannels, sauntering some ten yards behind them with Marion Heatherly, is his scapegrace brother, Augustus.

The girl has but just been introduced, and, prejudiced in his favour as she naturally has been, by hearing him abused, it is no wonder that she is considerably pleased with him.

Hers, too, is one of those natures exceptionally affected by abstract beauty, alike in persons and things. She was not, however, a girl to fall in love at first sight, or even rapidly. With a nature such as hers, she had been too experienced, too seasoned, if the term may pass, to the mere effect of good looks, from the time almost of childhood, to be in imminent danger from any sudden attack.

"And so you came down with your brother?" she is saying.

"Yes; at least, he picked me up at Reading, worse luck."

"Why worse luck?"

"Oh, because Hector and I don't hit it off—and, what is more, never shall."

"If you are in earnest, I think that is very sad!"

"What can you expect in this wretched country! It's a good deal the fault of the laws. Now, I haven't been going about the world long; but I've

gone about a lot. In America I soon learnt to see that elder brothers were institutions to do away with."

"You had better not let papa hear you say that," laughed Marion.

"No! why not, pray?"

"Because it would make him hate you, and
——"

"Well?"

"I should not like that. I'm afraid you are a sad radical, Mr. de Nares?"

"I can't think how any one with a grain of sense can be anything else. Things are evidently inf—— all wrong, and only a fool can hope to set them right with milk-and-water legislation."

"I am no politician, of course," said poor Marion, who was hardly prepared for such an unvarnished statement of her companion's views. "But, for all that, I am a staunch Conservative!"

This in a tone she might have used had she been telling some Mahommedan she was a Christian.

Augustus glanced up at her from under the peak of his red cricket cap, with a flash of his great dark eyes, half insolent, half amused, saying,—

"Perhaps you are a Conservative just because you are no politician."

"You are a great deal too bad, I declare," she retorted, with brightened colour. Then she thought it wiser to change the subject,—

"And what were you doing at Reading—cricket?"

"Oh, no; I was only doing a walk."

"A walk!"

"Yes, in three great-coats. You see, I ride Aureole in the Draycliffe stakes on Tuesday, and I had to take a few pounds off."

"Oh, I did not know you were a jockey! We shall have two then; for you know that Mr. Jones

is coming. How delightfully exciting! And am I to back you? Do you think you will win?"

"Well, considering they were laying twelves to-day against my mount, I should say it was rather a rickety investment," he answered with his habitual unjoyous laugh! "But you had better ask Lady Bagley, who knows far more about it than I do. My knowledge is limited to the market price of the nags."

"I suppose that is because you have only just returned from abroad! How long is it since you last rode—a race, I mean?"

"Oh, not long; about three weeks ago, at Paris. It was rather a childish affair though. I had some decent practice, however, shortly before, at Vincennes and La Marche."

"So Lady Bagley, you think, knows all about it?"

"They say so, and she generally manages to be on the winner. Where she gets her tips from I don't pretend to say, but they seem to be pretty straight ones."

"And do you think she will tell me what to bet on?"

"Well, it must be at the last moment, when all her own little commissions are done. But do you really want to bet?"

"Desperately! Oh, only gloves, of course. Mamma says I wear out more than my share; and there are so many of us," she added, with a little rueful *moue*.

"Come, I think I can manage that for you," said young De Nares, who was getting rather spooney, as he called it, which, truth to say, was his only idea of love—a feeling that with him, however, was pretty fierce while it lasted. "What kind of gloves do you want?"

"Oh, ball ones, of course."

"And how many?"

"I should like to win a dozen."

"And suppose you lose?"

"Oh! I never thought of that. Papa, I suppose, would have to pay," said Marion innocently.

"Which would be no fun, would it?"

"Oh, no! A very great bore."

"Well," said Augustus, in a tone which for him was wonderfully amiable, "we must try and manage to win for you somehow;" and then he added, with a marked seriousness and respect which threw the girl quite off her guard,—

"And let me see your size; just show me your hand please."

As she held her right one out to him, he took it at first in a most business-like way, remarking,—

"This is a loose garden glove *n'est-ce pas?* We must take it off."

"But I can tell you my size."

"And I tell you, if the gloves are to fit, I must measure it."

And before the young girl knew more about it, he had pulled the glove off.

"It's a nice little hand," he said, holding it in both his own by the fingers, and with a smile which she did not like.

She tried to pull it away with a jerk, but he was prepared for her.

"What is the matter now?" he said. "I am not kissing it."

"I should think not," she said, blushing scarlet.

"But I should like to," he added, quite unabashed, and with his eyes fixed neither on her hand nor on her eyes, but upon her lips.

You see, the Honourable Augustus never condescended to think of consequences, and that, of course, gives greater scope in certain cases over

those who do, and may partially account for his success in steeple-chases, which was not inconsiderable.

"Mr. de Nares!" exclaimed Marion, now really angry.

"Well, I am not doing it," he returned, quite coolly.

"Let go my hand instantly," she insisted, not without alarm, for this was her very first experience of the kind, and she remembered the bad character she had heard of this very cool young man.

But at that moment voices were distinctly heard approaching, and both besieger and besieged were spared any further pains for the time being. Lord Warrington and Miss Bagley were retracing their steps, and presently the group became a square one for a few minutes. Then, after a little chat about nothing, the two men accidentally, as it seemed, though probably it was a manœuvre of Miss Heatherly, changed partners; and thus the four strolled back to the publicity of the lawn, just as everybody except the children was being summoned into the house for tea.

Count de Turgv has arrived during the last few minutes from a country house in an adjoining county.

He is talking French to the eldest Miss Heatherly, as, with the rest, they troop up the stone steps and in at the door-windows, and all dispose themselves about the drawing-room as chance or inclination dictates.

"Allow me. *Oh, pardon,*" he is saying, as he squeezes between Lady Bagley and a table covered with cut flowers, which, to touch with the skirt of a coat, were to upset. "Your English *salons* of to-day are charming; but the navigation of the human ship made difficult. To the eye, *charmant, charmant!* so picturesque. I want at each instant

my sketch-book. Every spot where you are, there you may sit down—always something under you; but in one thing they are particular—they are crowded even when they are empty.”

As he speaks, more and more ears gradually listen, and a general amused laugh greets his conclusion, to which music the hearty growl or guffaw of the Squire Joe plays a mellow bass, which shows that the Frenchman has abandoned his own tongue when he finds he has an audience, for surely no one will suspect the Studfield John Bull of even a bowing acquaintance with any language but his own.

“Ha, ha, ha! you don’t do much,” he said, “of—of this sort of life in your parts, eh, Count? Country parties not amusing enough for French people. You prefer the boulevards, the *bvor de Boulong* or going off to the seaside, and *Monty Carlow*, eh?”

“Oh, it is not that,” replied De Turgy, his bearded face growing serious. “How shall we afford such hospitality like yours? Look you, my dear Mr. Heatherly, this is not the moment for *politique*; but without primogeniture and entail, a nation is for the dogs.”

“I am glad to hear you say that,” put in Lord Warrington, who was busily handing tea; “but I’ll go farther, and venture to say that the very defenders of those ancient blessings scarcely realize a tithe of what depends upon them.”

“Oh, then I can tell you *milor*, we are now *all* finding it out in France. Yes, and the intelligent republicans themselves, but they dare not to confess. The small, small proprietors, what we call the *petits rentiers*, are being discovered to-day to be the true burden on the state—the drones in the bee-hive—and a more dead weight on the public purse than any number of what you call monumental families.”

"I should rather like to know how you make that out?" almost growled young De Nares from his corner, where he had been for some minutes, chafing under this dose of what he called "reactionism."

"Because, my young friend," replied the Count, turning blandly in the dusk to where the voice came from, "they can just afford to do the very worst thing any man can possibly be guilty of."

"And that is—?"

"Nothing at all."

This, too, was greeted by a general laugh, and when it died away, he added,—

"And they do it."

There was almost a roar.

Then the polite legitimist, with the tact of his race, changed the subject, and coming across to the mistress of the house, began to describe the new opera.

Presently Mrs. Heatherly asked,—

"Pray, Count, as you will have no more tea, would you mind trying our new piano—a present from my brother, and Erard's latest effort? It is so delightful to be played to in the twilight, and Marion tells me you have such a brilliant touch."

He complied at once, verifying the compliment, and playing a dreamy, rippling melody, singularly suited to the time of day. Under its influence, Augustus crept up to where Marion sat, and strove to draw her into a whispered conversation. But notwithstanding the favourable impression which his looks had at first made upon her, his proceedings in the shrubbery, and a kind of daring look which he carried with him everywhere, had, for the moment at least, fairly scared her.

She responded but briefly to his several attempts, and was glad presently to be relieved from her embarrassment by the Count saying, as he rose from the instrument,—

"A perfect Erard! I do not know a higher way to praise a pianoforte. And now, Miss Marion, may I ask for my favourite valse, "The Aline," which is turning all heads as well as heels, and which you play so divinely."

And with music and chat, and Warrington and Lady Bagley already at *piquet* in one corner, the time flew by as quickly as could be desired, until a new aspect was given to affairs, just as the gong sounded for dressing, by the arrival of the later guests from town, chief among whom were Lady Amaranth Temple, her nephew, Clarence Hood, and last, but not least, Vaia.

CHAPTER VI.

A FRENCH STATESMAN.

It will have been seen that Lady Amaranth's hope of passing two or three preliminary quiet days with her present hosts had been frustrated by the course of events, chief among which was the uncontrollable hospitality of the Heatherlys themselves; for they could never forbear pressing one and all of their guests to come a little sooner, and stay a little longer than had at first been settled.

To-day was that same Saturday originally fixed upon for her ladyship's arrival; but Marion had been summoned home three or four days sooner "to help in the preparations," as the family expressed it; but really because the boys all clamoured for her return.

It was not the first time by several that Lady Amaranth and her daughter had stayed at Studfield, and with all her real liking for its inmates, she found the life there of somewhat too high pressure for her delicate nerves.

"It is charming," she had said to-day in the train, "in its way; but Studfield is a house which I should never dream of going to unless I felt unusually well; and though, thank Heaven, such is at present the case, I own to feeling anxious as to what my health may be when we come away. They are rather exuberant when all together, I must admit. Such a pity, you know, so much effervescence can't be bottled and used as essence to sprinkle about our London depression!"

"I wonder what Lord Warrington thinks of

it all!" the girl could not help saying shyly, at which Clarence Hood, who was in the far corner of the carriage absorbed in a love story, looked up quickly at her with a reproachful glance.

"Oh, he will like it; he delights in almost any change, and, with his tremendous constitution, will find not even the Heatherlys too severe a tonic. You see, my dear, as I was saying, it is a question of health. It is not natural for a family at the present day—I mean a family of position, of course—never to want a doctor, never to have an ache or a pain, nor even an accident for the benefit of the local practitioners; and we ordinary mortals may be pardoned if we get somewhat 'pumped in the race,' as Lady Bagley would express it. Lord War-rington is not an ordinary mortal—he never was."

At which Vaia almost regretfully murmured to herself,—

"No, indeed!"

"And I should like to know in what respect he is superior," Clarence had broken in with as he tossed down his book, "to my mind he is a regular prig, more full of himself than any earthly being I ever knew!"

"My dearest boy," said his aunt, "why this outbreak? I was only referring to his physical strength."

"And I doubt even that. Why, by his own account, he'll go for weeks at a stretch with little or no exercise."

"But he takes plenty at other times," said Vaia, who was astonished at herself for speaking, since she had no wish to fret her cousin.

"I tell you that fellow will never care a straw for anybody but himself, and would break the heart of any woman who was fool enough to care for him."

But any turn which this irrelevant remark might

have caused the discussion to take, was now frustrated by the arrival of the train at the little roadside station where the rather ponderous Studfield equipage awaited the travellers.

Needless to say that their welcome was as warm and demonstrative as the lateness of the hour would allow; and in less than forty minutes the whole goodly party, with the exception of those few people not expected till Monday, were seated round the festive old oak dining table of jovial renown.

Four-and-twenty already—for we have not introduced quite all the personages—and room for more!

The sound of many voices, be they fashionably low or merrily high, is ever in crescendo. The more or less strangeness of most large parties—all the guests being rarely intimate, if so much as acquainted with each other; the very hunger of some of the members; the selection of congenial topics, and the inventory which most pairs of eyes are busy in taking alike of persons and things—all contribute to the early quietness of the men and women assembled to discuss both the good things of the *cuisine* and higher matters.

But as the beauty, the jewels of the fair, and the first glasses of champagne add their effect to that *bien être* which the consumption of artistically succulent food has been by nature ordained to produce upon our poor mortal selves, both mentally and bodily, a certain pleasant audacity comes over all present; the voices acquire *timbre*, the taps of liquid laughter are turned on by universal consent, and a *tête-à-tête* takes heart from the rising buzz to hope its private words will be happily drowned to all but a single ear; while the ambitious wit or hardy chaffer, who launches his challenge or *repartee* across the table, or to some distant rival, is compelled to a higher pitch by the general growth of sound on every side.

Lady Amaranth is quite happy in the place of honour by the side of her old friend, Squire Joe, and comforting herself with the reflection that she can talk or not as her strength or inclination may dispose her; while on her right is a beardless boy, not staying in the house, whose shyness will bless her the more, the more she lets him alone.

So presently she begins by enlarging to the Squire upon the pleasure it has been to Vaia and herself to have his pretty daughter confided to them in town.

"The thanks, Lady Amaranth, are all due from us, I do assure you," he says, gallantly adding,— "But we could not spare her any more; for, my dear friend, she is the pet of the house is our maid Marion, as we call her."

And suddenly the good man nearly chokes with emotion as he looks down the table, catches the eye of the fair child he is praising, exchanges a loving nod with her, and asks his neighbour abruptly, as a very palpable tear glistens in his eye,—

"Is she not a good girl now?"

This sort of thing is quite out of Lady Amaranth's line.

She pities it, and classes it in her mind with hobnail boots—perhaps ratcatchers and other rustic evils. She smiles quite benignly, however, as she joins in the favourite's praises, and pleads to have her up in town with them again after a little while.

"Mrs. Heatherly tells me," she adds, "that you are giving up your London house."

"The times, my dear lady, the times!" pleads her host, with a brightness which makes Lady Amaranth suspect that personally, at least, Joe Heatherly regards escaping the season as anything but a misfortune.

"Eleven farms on my hands," he goes on.

The town mouse cannot quite see the force of the country mouse's plea.

"Of course," she says, "when income diminishes, prudence compels reductions. The question is, where to retrench. Now, it seems to me that with your daughters going out—I of course, take the privilege of an old friend——" and so on.

She cannot think what this bumpkin is about not to take his blooming goods to market. If times are bad, all the more reason for disposing of them in their prime; for young girls are as much perishable commodities as fruits, flowers, or fish.

They are far more expensive to keep and provide for during the term of their natural lives than to obtain husbands for, even at the high outlay of one or more London seasons; and if her ladyship knew how to state the case with less unwelcome plainness than we have done, she took care, nevertheless, to leave no doubt on the Squire's mind as to her own views of his duty.

"Your daughters are charming, my dear friend," she urges, in conclusion—"all of them; but the three Graces themselves would become dowdy and countrified in time if they never saw Paris."

It is to be feared that this allusion was quite lost upon the worthy man, to say nothing of the possible *jeu de mot*. Poor woman, she was herself hardly more erudite than the Squire; and though she had quite lately been looking at the celebrated Rubens in the National Gallery, which, no doubt, put the illustration into her head, she evidently forgot that it was Mesdames Juno, Minerva, and Venus who are there represented posing before the mythic and expert son of Priam—not the chaste daughters of Jupiter and Eurynome.

Now, although Joe Heatherly was not the man to yield up any cardinal point before the eloquence of lips male or female, the effect of Lady Amaranth's

words was so far successful as to dispose this obstinate father to part with Marion for another short visit to the Temples, that she might enjoy, a few weeks later, some of the choicest delights of Mayfair.

For the moment, the girl was seated between Clarence Hood—who liked her perhaps as much as a man of his fervid temperament, when in love with one woman, can care about anybody else, and that in rather a brotherly sort of way—and Augustus de Nares, who had taken her in to dinner.

The latter, by the bye, was not in the least intended to do so by anybody but himself; but that, for him, was enough.

He had just been introduced to another young lady—the sister of Lady Amaranth's beardless neighbour—and had perfectly well heard Mrs. Heatherly's whispered behest that he was to escort her to the dining-room.

He reckoned, however, that in the general fuss his hostess could not possibly tell that he heard; and, having made his plan, he proceeded to carry it out, remaining in conversation with the young person—who, by the way, was just as colourless as the aborigines of the soil usually prove in all counties—until dinner was announced. He then coolly walked over to where Marion was standing with her back towards him, and saying, with marked assurance, "I believe I am to have the pleasure——" marched her off before she had time to collect her thoughts.

He is now, with equal effrontery, boasting to her of his exploit.

Young as he is, De Nares has already had considerable experience as a lady-killer, and has learnt that a not inconsiderable percentage of the fair sex are decidedly in favour of being taken by storm.

Even of those who, in theory, highly disapprove of so cavalier a mode of wooing, a large number practically succumb to it.

It spares them a good deal of trouble and delay, at all events, and saves a girl from that which many a gentle nature most dreads—making up her mind.

It is feared that Miss Marion Heatherly will hardly rise in any one's esteem, when she is found tolerating — perhaps encouraging — would be the honestest word—this young good-for-nothing in the disrespectful and most impertinent course he has chosen to adopt towards her on this the first day of their meeting, and beneath her parents' hallowed roof.

Certain it is, however, that Marion is, albeit a little scared, partly amused, and not a little flattered, and not a little pleased and excited, by a treatment so different to any she has ever met with before.

No doubt the fact of this unceremonious adorer being the brother of the staid, and, as far as a girl can know, irreproachable Lord Warrington, has much to do with her tolerance. Anyhow, it is with a manner by no means alarming that she now says, looking up at him the while with a half-shy, sidelong glance,—

“But that was very wrong of you—quite too bad of you—indeed it was.”

“Oh, I daresay. I don't pretend to be good, though it is rather hard to be scolded for it by you.”

“And why, pray?”

“Because it is all your fault.”

“My fault! But what had I to do with it?”

“Everything. You were the temptation. Now temptation is the only thing I never can resist.”

“Smart, but not original.”

“I beg your pardon, it is.”

“How so?”

“Original sin!”

At the end of the table, Hector has been recounting to his hostess the strange episode of the Van de Velde.

Now, burglars and thieves are poor Mrs. Heather-

ly's *bêtes noires*, and anything connected with them, although it may not please, is certain to interest her.

"And what have you done about it?" she asks, forgetting to eat.

"My first step was, of course, to go straight to Schippmann."

"Who, of course, had not sent him?"

"Even that clue fails me, for he had just started for the Continent, with plans so unsettled that no letters were to be forwarded till he wrote."

"But was there no foreman—I mean, no representative, or whatever he is called—who could tell you whether such a picture had been shown to Mr. Schippmann?"

"Yes; and I questioned him; but he told me so many unknown and even odd-looking men are always calling, with muffled-up pictures, to show them to the great dealer, and to him only, that he could give me no information."

"And what have you done with the 'cattle' piece?"

"Well, finding that Schippmann was to be away at least ten days, I sent the painting off to its lawful owner upon my personal responsibility."

"I suppose there is no chance of 'the convict,' as you call him, coming back to claim it?"

"None. I should say he is far too much afraid of being 'claimed' himself."

Vaia is too far off to catch more than a stray word or two of this conversation, although she has heard the story of the Van de Velde before, on the occasion of Lord Warrington dining with them in a quiet way, which, with one other meeting, when a party had been made up to visit a theatre, were the only times that she had seen him since his first introduction to her.

At each meeting, and to-night more than ever, she feels that, whether he shall ever make any use of his power or no, there sits the only man in all the world before whom she is powerless.

She felt it, or suspected it, from the very first ; but now she knows it. Even as she is pretending to eat, for it is little more than a pretence, poor girl, she is saying to herself,—

“If he told me to walk into a gulf, I suppose I should decline ; and yet I feel at this instant as though I should have to do it. I wonder if he knows it already ! Oh, I should die of shame !” And the bare thought brings the blood rushing up to her very temples.

“I would sooner die than he should learn it from me, or that any human being should do so—my mother, least of all ; and yet if he might learn the truth, and from no word, no act of mine— Oh, yes, I would give worlds for that ! And yet, why so ? Alas ! he cares not for me ! Likes me, yes, evidently. That’s the worst ! No foe to love like liking. If he loathed me, there might be hope. Hope !—sweet word, sweeter even than love itself—is there one particle of you within me ? I can see not the faintest grounds for it, and yet—and yet !”

At that point in Vaia’s reverie, she chances to look across the table, and meets her cousin’s eyes fixed upon her with a wild and miserable intensity. She smiles upon him kindly, but he takes no notice, and affects to have some business with his plate.

For the last few days his fears that Vaia does not love him have been complicated with the new terror that she loves some one else.

The girl heaves a weary sigh, and turns to discuss the approaching races with Jack Heatherly.

“Another dreadful murder in Ireland, Count !” says Lady Bagley, across the table.

It is one of the many things which make her valuable, that she helps to make conversation general ; perhaps to atone for her endless *tête-à-tête* games at cribbage, double dummy, and the like ; for she is formidable at them all, and can even hold her own at billiards against the average male.

"*Hélas*, yes!" he rejoins; "and what a cowardly one! Ah *milady* I have no patience; but you wish it, *vous le voulez ainsi*."

It takes a good deal to astonish Lady Bagley, but this point-blank assertion does rather stagger her.

"I wish it, Count!"

"But yes. You, your country, your government—it is all the same."

"I'm sure all our statesmen think of nothing else. Ireland monopolizes all England's time."

"She does indeed, and for no good at all. Statesmen! Where are they? You have only politicians."

"Come, Count," said Warrington, joining in; "what is a statesman?"

"Cromwell was one; your great, bad Queen Elizabeth was another."

"He did not ask who, but what," risked Vaia, too interested to be shy.

"Hear, hear," shouted Joe Heatherly, from the other end of the table. "Come, Count, a definition—a definition."

"Oh, I am ready," answered De Turgy, quite radiant; for he was never happier than when everybody was listening to him.

"You always are that, Count," put in the Squireess, encouragingly.

"Ah, madame, I am confused at your compliment."

And he laid his hand on his heart, but no child would have believed him.

"It is beyond me to put into a word—a phrase—what a statesman is. I will be modest and tell you for sure what he is not." (Applause.) "A statesman is not one who applies means which are palpably inadequate to desired ends."

"Bravo! well put, well put," from sundry voices.

"Have we any statesmen in all Europe?" asked Warrington.

"One, certainly; perhaps more."

"Name!"

"Bismarck. Oh! I hate him—but he is a statesman *hors ligne*. One of the few men alive who does comprehend the Irish question."

"Explain!"

"He has one at home, and he shows you; he will teach you for nothing how to solve it. I allude to Russian Poland."

"I'm afraid we have not followed the question closely enough; pray tell us," said Mrs. Heatherly.

"Oh, it is not long; a sentence or two makes all clear," said the Frenchman, growing more serious. "Like all great policies, it is simple. Throw ourselves in the future, and, instructed by the past, what do we see? One of two things—an Ireland quite independent, or else an Ireland as much an English province as Middlesex or the Isle of Wight. The first is so improbable, in spite of all Mr. Gladstone has tried to do——"

A tremendous cheer from the Squire.

"But we will speak only of the second. It is a question of time——"

"A terribly long time, I fear," sighed Lady Bagley, who congratulated herself upon having started a hare which so large a field appeared eager to hunt.

"Because you make it so," pursued the speaker, imperturbably. "You will not use your strength."

"We will not tyrannize, certainly," said Hector.

"It would be so much kinder—to the poor Irish people, I mean. Oh! cruel—yes, I admit, barbarous; but to whom? To Parnellites, to land-leaguers, to boycotters, all the poor innocent *diables*, yes, grant you. Oh! my *sensible* heart bleed for dem!"

His accent always grew worse under excitement; and this, with the mock pathos the Count here threw into his voice, sent the whole table—save

poor Hood, who had not taken in one word of the discussion—into a perfect burst of laughter.

He went on,—

“You should use your power to abridge the time, and to run the ‘carpet-baggers,’ as the Americans call them—the professional politicians who dread any settlement of the question, and who grow fat on the pennies — oh, but millions of pennies — duped from the miserable Irishman and the poor Irish servant girl. You are like a surgeon who, when he ought to cut deep, keeps pricking the bad place with the end of his knife; and you have a beautiful word for that—*tinkering*, what you call. Once you tinkered with Scotland, you tinkered with Wales; but now you are older, you should know better. Cromwell never did tinker; he was a beast; he cut throats; like that great man Strafford—you cut off there a famous head. Strafford, who near put an end to Mr. Cromwell and *compagnie*—the latter should have taught you *never tinker*.”

“Then, practically, what measures would you advise, Count, in our present crisis?” asked Warington.

“I would give Ireland everything but political nationality. Oh! as many jigs as she pleases. Music, poems, religion, costume, all national; but in politics, as English as Wapping.”

“But you would have her representatives at Westminster?” inquired Lady Bagley.

“Yes, yes; but they should only speak as representing an English province.”

“Oh! would they!” said De Nares, now speaking for the first time, and in his usual defiant tone.

“But yes, but yes,” said the Count, quite beaming upon him; “for it would be a law that the first time they did otherwise, *Halte là! Ipso facto* his seat is gone!”

"And what English House of Commons would agree to that?" pursued Augustus.

"The first that shall be led by a real statesman. For why? There is no other way."

Lord Warrington shook his head and looked grave. He was about to take the discussion up in a really serious manner, only on second thought he deemed it was perhaps wiser to leave it alone, especially as Augustus de Nares had thought fit to meddle.

Mrs. Heatherly, too, rose at this moment, as she observed,—

"Well, you certainly have thrown a new light upon the subject—such a flood of it, indeed, that we ladies will at once resolve ourselves into a committee in the drawing-room, to ponder on what we have heard."

"A very select committee, madame," said the Frenchman, rising at the same time as herself; and the gentlemen were thereupon left to their wine.

CHAPTER VII.

A MERRY EVENING

OF course the idea that the subject was to be pursued by the ladies was a pure joke; and although Squire Joe was wont to detain the men somewhat longer over their claret than is now quite fashionable, all the fair beings found far more welcome employment during the half-hour or so they were alone, than any state matters, however originally handled, could possibly supply.

Of course, too, Vaia and Marion were together in an instant, and seated far enough away from the others to be out of earshot.

In a girlish intimacy like theirs, an absence of four days is an age, especially when any love affairs are in the wind; and the Temples had arrived so late that there had been no time for confidences before dinner.

Naturally when the gentlemen go to smoke by-and-by, and the third Miss Heatherly betakes her to her friend's room, after the dismissal of Vaia's maid, that will be the time *par excellence*; but meanwhile the friends snatch such comfort as they may from the less secure present.

"Well," begins Marion briskly, "I've an immense piece of news for you."

"Not a proposal already, May, surely."

"Oh! I know nothing about that, but should say one was inevitable."

"Well, well, your news!"

"Vaia, you're in love!"

Miss Temple grew scarlet, and at the same instant exceedingly grave.

"Hush! for Heaven's sake," she said quickly, regardless of the fact that the words had been whispered, and that she and her friend were quite out of earshot.

"Marion, if any one but you dared to say such a thing, I—I should hate that person for ever."

"But as it is no one but me, you will love me the more. Oh! sweet Vaia, it is to keep the secret that I tell it. There is yet time, but beware! Anybody who is at all clear-sighted would soon find it out, were they as wrapped up in you as I am."

"Do you think mamma knows?" asked Vaia, with a new-born terror.

The *confidante* laughed at the idea.

"Oh! May," Vaia went on, hiding her face with the fan she held; "can anything in this world be a more crushing humiliation? to care for a man to whom you are as nothing, who has paid you no sort of attention, and for one's shame to be known."

'Nonsense, dear; it is only known to me.'

Vaia's hand sought that of her friend, and they remained clasped together, hidden among the folds of their skirts.

"At least," continued Marion, "I'm afraid that is not quite true."

"What! Do not tell me that *he*——"

"Which *he*?"

"Marion, have you the heart to joke with me?"

"Nothing can be farther from my intention. Well then, he shows only too clearly that he knows all."

"Oh! no, no; this is too cruel. I—I cannot bear it."

"You astound me! How can the feelings of a man you no longer care for, whom you never loved——"

"Child, we are talking at cross purposes. You did not think I was alluding to poor Clarence?"

"Of course I did. It was him I meant when I said—Oh! poor, poor Vaia! Did you think I meant Lord Warrington?"

"I did, indeed. Then you don't believe he has found me out?"

"No, I do not. He does not give me the idea of one who would be quick to fancy a woman loved him."

Vaia felt relieved; then a fresh alarm seized her!

"But, May, what is to be done with Clarence?"

"Why, you must throw him over."

"I didn't mean that. If he suspects, and you are quite right, he is already mad with jealousy—if he believes I—I care for—for this new friend."

"Oh, Vaia, how shy you are!"

"Hush! He will be sure to tell mamma; perhaps he has done so already."

"I am afraid we must expect that; but Lady Amaranth, not wishing to believe it, may refuse to do so, and ascribe his suspicion to a mere morbid jealousy. Still, if she asks you?"

"And she will. Oh, May, what shall I do? Mamma, with all her good points, never can be brought, you know, to look upon affairs of the heart with the least seriousness. Oh, Marion! Marion!"—and here poor Vaia gave a palpable shudder—"it is worse even than we feared, for mamma is quite capable of blurting the whole matter out to Lord Warrington himself."

"Oh, surely not!"

"She would, I tell you. Oh, mamma! You know I love her dearly, and she is better than pure gold; only in things of this kind, well, she is—she is simply inconceivable. Listen! she would think nothing of saying, 'Warrington, I wish you would go abroad for a month or two. My foolish

girl, who, of course, is to marry her cousin, has taken it into her silly head that she likes you best, and so, just to oblige me——’”

“Never!” broke in Marion.

“I tell you I can hear her saying it. She is what the Count would call *inouie*.”

“The worst of parents,” put in the younger girl naïvely, “is that one has no control over them.”

“Not a scrap,” assented Vaia. “One hears of *enfants terribles*, but you can, at least, whip them all round, and send them to bed. Now the others——”

“Would justly feel hurt at the proceeding,” laughed the third Miss Heatherly.

And Vaia joined in the laugh, and got more good from it than from any amount of sympathy.

Presently Marion put her little rosebud of a mouth close to the other’s ear, and said,—

“Vaia, darling, I shall love you now more than ever. There was only one bad thing about you; but you have become perfect in my eyes, since I find——”

“Since you find——”

“That you can really care for somebody at last.”

“Well, dear,” replied her friend, “I suppose one would be rather incomplete without it. And now tell me, can you too love?”

“Oh, yes; do I not love you?”

“Hypocrite!”

“Well, you know, I was shamming. Yes, I can love. I always owned it; but, Vaia—and oh, I am not joking now—I know quite well I shall be superior to you in that, as in everything else.”

“But I do not see——”

“But I do. I am much, much more selfish. I own that if I lost one lover, I should console myself with another. Are you shocked?”

"Why should I be? If it is the truth, why should you not tell me? But here are the gentlemen, I declare. Come, we must do company."

And with that they rose and wandered towards the rest of the party.

Coffee had been served with the cigarettes in the dining-room, so there was now no waiting for the clatter of cups to die away before music was evoked as a grateful relief to prolonged conversation.

After an hour thus enjoyed, some of the elders betook them to whist, while Mrs. Heatherly started an impromptu hop for the young people, who were in so large a majority on this occasion.

Warrington, who already considered himself almost what the French call *entre deux âges*, decided, after a moment's hesitation, on joining "the light brigade," reflecting,—

"I shall always be young enough for cards; I shall soon be too old for dancing."

After the first waltz, which he danced with the eldest Miss Heatherly, there came a "Lancers," which Hector missed, preferring to sit out with Miss Bagley, a young lady who, at six-and-twenty, affected to consider herself *passée*, which, as yet, no one else did. Perhaps this was done to provoke contradiction, or possibly because, being a sharp girl, she took warning by the disgust with which she had so often been filled by the painful kittenishness of damsels ten and fifteen years her seniors; who, simply for the reason that they were still unmarried, appeared to be self-condemned to a sentence of perpetual vapidty both of mind and body.

As she and Hector watched the Market Lancers, into which the dance was merging, from their coigne of vantage, Miss Bagley said,—

"Five years ago I should still have thought that

the greatest fun imaginable; but now it would bore me to death."

"*Anch'io!* But, to look on at, I love it still," said Warrington.

"I think that in proportion as we grow wiser, it is sweet to see others make fools of themselves."

They were old friends, these two, living in the same set, and thus being much thrown together, both in town and country, at home and abroad.

Hector liked Miss Bagley, because she was the only society girl he ever met who seemed totally unaware of the fact that he was a bachelor peer and a *parti*—she, a girl on her promotion.

And this was so rare a rest for him.

He never flirted with her, nor felt inclined to do so; while she, on her part, was always pleasant, never capricious, well-informed and sensible, enjoying his society, with no attempt to emphasize or conceal the fact; but she always bore herself towards him as if she had a husband and he a wife.

It is a question whether more young ladies of the day might not find it worth while to take a leaf out of Constance Bagley's book.

Their chat over, they emerged from their corner, and Lord Warrington went up to Vaia and asked for the waltz just then striking up.

It was accorded with unconcealed pleasure; but, after the first turn, Hector fancied his partner kept casting uneasy glances about the room.

He was admittedly second to none as a dancer, but in this accomplishment, as in all else, he had his theories. Among other rules, he approved of frequent short rests.

Presently he sees Clarence Hood—who, for reasons of his own, has lately grown quite freezing in his manner towards his lordship—advancing with Miss Temple's fan in his hand, which she had for-

gotten, and left on the couch whereon she and Marion had held their recent conference.

But the girl does not appear to see her betrothed—for such he has some right to consider himself,—and says to her *danseur*,—

“I do so enjoy a waltz where there is no crowd. Shall we go on?”

And away they whirl to the admiration of lookers-on.

Waltzing is not now the art it was when no man was deemed a past master who could not fly in two or three gyrations of the exploded but famous *deux temps*, from one end of a large ball-room to the other; and that with no violence, no apparent effort, but by a cunning management of the centrifugal force generated by himself and partner, as they revolve and are endued with a propelling power by an imperceptible action of both his arms.

Still, in its subdued and pottering decadence, the *rôle* of the male performer remains far the more difficult of the two.

Now the feature of Warrington's dancing is the same manly ease which distinguishes his general manner, and notably his seat on horseback.

There are many men as erect, some quite as easy, but the union of the two is rare indeed.

The perfection with which the pair move on this occasion is not calculated to modify the look of intense irritation with which Clarence stands watching them with set lips and knitted brows.

Poor Clarence Hood! It is your curse that you love the wrong woman. How many a man's life has been wrecked from the same cause!

It is a platitude to say that we are all very amiable so long as things go smoothly with us; but Lady Amaranth's nephew was in reality a being who might have lived and died happy and beloved under almost any ordinary circumstances.

Naturally amiable, in spite of a fiery temperament and violent temper, he had not, as yet, been utterly spoiled by either his semi-foreign bringing up, or the terrible amount of spoiling to which, owing to the delicacy of his health even from infancy, he had been exposed, more especially at the hands of his aunt.

A linguist, a decent artist, and already a fairly well-read man, he was far from destitute of resources in himself, and might have developed all those domestic aptitudes and qualities which make home happy to a woman, provided always that each cared for the other.

But from his earliest recollection he had well-nigh worshipped Vaia Temple, all the more ardently, perchance, because their meetings were so rare.

It is some excuse surely for deeming a woman divine that a man has not had the opportunity to discover that she is human—a mere imperfect creature like himself.

The week's delay upon which Vaia had insisted, that he might the more surely know his own mind, had elapsed three days before they left town. He had lost no time in seeking her—not to claim her promise, for that was given already, but to clench the engagement by the only step wanting to make it binding—his own assurance that he had duly considered the case in all its bearings, and was as bent as ever upon their union.

Clarence was no coxcomb; he had indeed anything but a high opinion of himself, his fascinations, or any qualities of mind or body he possessed. But then, of course, he had the most exalted idea of Vaia's character, and he especially credited her with a nature which in its true womanliness would hold the first requisite in a lover to be that he could love.

Now love, he knew, was his own strong point.

'Then a modest, nice-minded girl, who has no other

attachment, would be almost sure to let herself be guided in her choice by her mother, especially such a mother as Lady Amaranth; for Hood had nearly as exaggerated an idea of that decidedly every-day lady as she had of him.

Another attribute of Vaia's, according to him, was the most scrupulous sense of honour. She had given her absolute word—conditionally, it is true, upon his taking a week for farther reflection—but he had now fulfilled his part of the contract, which, according to agreement, was the only one wanting.

Still, as he called to tell her so, he did not conceal from himself that he was a prey to vague misgivings. A thousand times he told himself: "I wrong her shamefully to suspect she would perjure herself."

He had his fears all the same, and they were not unfounded. With the *clairvoyance* of deep love—that single-hearted love felt only once in a lifetime—Clarence read at a glance the spell, for it was nothing less, which the first meeting with Lord Warrington had thrown over the girl he worshipped; and as the intercourse between these two progressed, he saw, he felt, that fatal influence—quite unsought, it was evident, by him who exercised it—envelop and control her like some impalpable net.

Not that Vaia in any sense showed to advantage in the presence of this man. Any one meeting her for the first time when he was by would have thought her very stupid, and would probably have inquired afterwards if there was anything habitually odd about Miss Temple.

It was as if her mind—even her frame—were slightly paralyzed; or it would perhaps be more near the mark to describe her as somewhat dazed, frightened, cowed.

The meeting had taken place, and naturally alone.

It was very short, and Clarence was constrained to say little, for his cousin began by declaring she was far from well.

"Dear Clarence," she said, "if you want me to believe that you love me, do not let us speak of love or engagement for a few days. If you gain nothing, I promise you shall lose nothing by this."

"I am most unhappy that you are suffering. You cannot doubt that it shall be as you wish. Still, in pity tell me—not to relieve any doubt, for I will not wrong you so far; but to bless and comfort me in the interval, tell me all will be well at last."

But she only drooped her head and was silent.

"Oh, Vaia! speak to me."

"Clarence," she said coldly, "you are doing the very thing I have just begged you not to do."

How cruel the most gentle of us can be to those who love us unasked!

He had then left her without a word, and there had been no opportunity for confidential intercourse since, although Miss Temple's indisposition had presumably not outlived that day.

He had gone to Lady Amaranth with his fears, his jealousy, and his love, as he always did with his troubles, and she kissed and comforted him to the best of her power, as was her wont.

She laughed at his anxieties, declaring it was absurd to think Vaia could feel anything for Lord Warrington but appreciation of his conversation and pleasant manners.

"He is far too wrapped up in himself, my dearest boy, for any woman to care about him seriously."

And now to-night there they both are beneath his gaze, locked in that embrace of the waltz which the sanction of society goes such a little way towards making endurable to the jealous looker-on.

Presently they stop at the other side of the room, right opposite to him.

Hood hesitates a moment, and then crosses over to them. He tries to speak calmly, but the slight twitches in his face betray his emotion. He is very angry. Of Warrington he takes no notice.

"I beg your pardon, Vaia, but this was to have been our waltz."

She only looks ineffably bored as she replies,—

"Was it? Oh, so it was. I beg your pardon," and, trumping up an evidently forced smile, "Come, Clarence dear, forgive me; you shall have the next."

"I am engaged for that to Miss Heatherly. I don't throw people over."

"You were not there."

"No; you sent me for your fan."

"Well, I have been very naughty, but I cannot help it now, can I?"

"You can finish the dance with me at least."

But it was Vaia's turn to be angry.

"Do not be absurd, Clarence. I shall do nothing of the kind. The idea of my standing on so much ceremony with a cousin!"

Lord Warrington by this time had had enough of standing still with no one to speak to. Vaia's step exactly suited his, and he wanted another turn. He rightly felt that he owed scant ceremony to Hood, who had just been so wanting in that respect towards him.

"Miss Temple, shall we go on?"

The wretched youth turned upon him instantly, his lips parted ready to insult, when a still more threatening "Clarence!" from Vaia saved him, for the time at least, from a deplorable error. Besides, he had told himself beforehand that he would be mindful of Lady Amaranth's reiterated injunction never under any circumstances to make a scene.

"It does not belong to our world," she always said.

The next time Hector and his *sylphide* paused, young Hood was nowhere to be seen.

"I am afraid you must have thought my cousin very rude," she said.

"What, to you? I really did not listen," which was quite true.

"Oh no, to you, in coming to monopolize your partner without a word of apology to you."

"That was not quite *en règle*, was it? I don't think he likes me."

"No more do I," laughed she. "I wonder why? I think he is——" she was going to say *jealous*, but even in this sense—a sense quite apart from love—she instinctively avoided the word. "I think very young men are often rather set against—against——"

"Old ones? Old ones like me?"

"How absurd! You know I cannot mean that. I was trying to say that boys and youths who do not know the world, have often a kind of grudge against men a few years older, who do."

"Yes, I have noticed it, although I cannot say I remember passing through the phase myself. I am still as I was at twenty—partial to men many years older than myself."

At this point Tom Heatherly came up to claim Vaia, the frolic strains of a polka striking up at the moment.

The day being Saturday, dancing ceased punctually at twelve.

Clarence did not trust himself again to approach Vaia; and after everybody, including the card people, had been lightly refreshed in the dining-room, this first merry evening of the present stay at Studfield was brought prosperously to an end.

CHAPTER VIII.

SUNDAY IN THE COUNTRY.

SCANDAL has been known to declare of Lady Bagley, that she played cards, and, of course, any other games, upon the Sabbath—not only when sojourning in benighted foreign parts, but when in the sacred domains of Protestant Victoria she happened to be upon a visit to any adherents of the Pope.

Before, however, believing a charge so heinous, we ought to insist on being furnished with very strong evidence indeed; and, as neither her very wise daughter, nor either of their trusty lady's maids were at all likely to betray her even if guilty, we will fain follow Squire Joe, and ignore an impeachment which might deprive her for ever of general countenance, could it be proved.

Certainly, as she takes her place this morning at the breakfast-table, no one would ever believe her capable of any irregularities of either that or any other kind.

Handsomely, yet severely dressed, her rather classic profile held high, she cares not how much trouble she gives her right hand; the cup must come up all the way to her lips, for her lips are not thinking of going down to the cup, not they. There is an audible "I'm going to church" in every inch of her.

"I suppose," says Mrs. Heatherly, "the young men won't mind walking as it is so near;" and she sweeps her benign glance round the table.

"I'll answer for that," cries her rubicund spouse, from the other end of it. "Eh, lads, I'll show you

all the short cut, and then we needn't start till the break does. We'll trip it through the daisies—as pretty a bit of up and down as you can wish to see on a spring morning.”

“And if you step out you will be in time to hand us down from the break as we arrive,” said his wife.

Here Lady Amaranth languidly suggested that some of the girls, too, might prefer walking, an amendment vehemently seconded by her daughter, who said across the table, with that sauciness which young ladies oftentimes adopt towards men whom they know to be smitten by some one else,—

“Mr. de Nares, will you be my escort? I remember those ditches of old.”

“Very happy, I am sure, if you don't insist upon my company beyond the door.”

“How do you mean?”

“I never go to church.”

“Shut up, Augustus; none of that nonsense here, I beg.”

It was Hector who spoke, and, though its tone was low, it was severe.

“I must answer a civil question,” laughed the younger brother.

“And, pray, from what Pagan land have you brought such ridiculous ideas? You used to go like other people.”

“Yes, until I knew better.”

“Oh, I see!” pursued Warrington, who thought ridicule his best resource. “The sudden self-emancipation of a great mind, eh? Pray, do you still admit of a Supreme Being?”

“Why, of course I do,” snapped Augustus roughly. “Do you take me for an idiot?”

“Come!” laughed the peer, with biting irony, and addressing everybody but his brother. “Come, that's really very kind of him. I'm quite surprised!”

Augustus was now crimson, for an irresistible titter

went round, only silenced when Lady Bagley made one of her well-timed interventions.

"Perhaps," she said, loudly enough to be heard by all, "Mr. de Nares means only that he has exchanged one faith for another." Then to him—"Is not this so?"

"Yes, it is," he replied.

The staunch old Tory host had been ill-at-ease during the above, and began to think he had made a mistake in inviting a young man who had bad taste enough to air his profanity before young ladies; but now he felt reassured.

It was something to find this audacious non-church-goer was, at least, no atheist. Still, Squire Joe's orthodoxy was outraged at the idea that his young guest might be a priest in disguise. To what he called an honest Catholic he could be indulgent, particularly if such were either a benighted foreigner, like his friend the Count, to whom it came as it were by nature, and was indigenous to the soul, like truffles to Perigord, or else to one of the grand old English families, who had stuck to the ancient faith through all time. But for what he called a "pervert," his scorn and mistrust knew no bounds.

But judge of the effect produced upon the Squire and his breakfast-table generally, when, in answer to the question timidly put by his wife, as to which of the numerous creeds Lord Warrington's heir-presumptive now professed to belong, he boldly answered, amid a general silence—

"I am a Buddhist!"

Some laughed, some looked grave and shocked, and more looked puzzled.

Hector alone looked more thoroughly disgusted than he often allowed himself to do. He well knew that this incubus of a Gus was simply "talking for the gallery"; that he was no more a Buddhist than the footman now changing his plate, and probably knew

but little more about it; but resuming, with an effort, his bantering tone, and hoping that the absurdity of his junior's last utterance might redeem, or cause to be forgotten, the want of taste of the irreligion he had previously shown, he said—

“Ah, that explains it!”

“What?” asked Gus, still ready for a row.

“I saw in the papers the other day, there had been a general Buddhist rejoicing throughout India. It was doubtless in honour of your accession.”

This caused so loud, albeit good-natured, an outburst from all present, that De Nares felt any retort would be ignominiously drowned; and, as the laugh died away, it was Lady Bagley who once more came to the rescue.

“Count,” she said, “you know everything. What is your experience of young Christian gentlemen who become heathens?”

“Why, milady,” replied the ever-ready De Turg—
“no offence to my young friend here; one is never personal, of course—I have found them all the same—freethinkers, agnostics, Buddhists; Buddhist sounds better, but it is all one—all the same; the name is nothing, because it means always the same thing—*nothing at all*. My experience is, that when a man or a woman becomes any of these, they only want an excuse to do all that they like and nothing they dislike.”

It was deemed a very good definition, and a fitting end to the subject.

“Count,” said Heatherly, as all rose, “I’ve ordered a nag to canter you over to Haggerston, where there’s a chapel. Come along, and I’ll show you the way on the map.”

About an hour later all this goodly company found themselves *en route*.

Most of the men wore black coats and tall hats, as, needless to say, did the lord of the manor.

It is remarkable that two things so dissimilar as racing and church-going should be alike in one respect; they are the only occasions upon which the "chimney pot" figures out of London.

Augustus, as might be expected, lounged along in a light shooting jacket and one of those apologies for a head-covering, known, we believe, as an Oxford cap. But then he was not "going in," he said.

It is curious how the coyest maiden will put on a compelled valour in the cause, either of charity or church. As Vaia and De Nares lingered for an instant outside the ivy-covered porch, shy little Marion stopped as she was passing them, and said to the latter, looking frankly up at him with her great innocent blue eyes—

"I wish you would come in"; and seeing hesitation in his face, she added, "It would so please papa."

He smiled as he asked,—

"But will it really please you?"

Vaia had discreetly gone on.

Marian lowered her orbs now, and blushing, answered,—

"Yes, it would, very much; and then, glancing at his attire, she added, with a half-comical archness,—

"You know you needn't make yourself too conspicuous."

"No, no; and mind, I haven't promised to sit it out. I've got a pipe in my pocket, and if the vicar gives us too much fire and brimstone, I shall do my worshipping under the canopy of heaven until *you* come."

"You are very profane; and do you know, Mr. Buddhist, I hated you at breakfast."

The Squire, who had stopped to ask a farmer after his sick wife, now came up with some of the stragglers, and all went in together.

The Vicar of Studfield was a man after

Heatherly's own heart, and that is why he had given him the living over the head of a nephew of his own, who had been erroneously brought up to look upon it as a right.

Yes, the Reverend Maurice Latimer was a Tory of Tories, a Protestant of Protestants, a rabid anti-ritualist, and down to the cut of his waistcoat as orthodox as the Primate.

And yet with all this he was eminently a man of the times, and had at first quite startled his patron, never by the matter, but greatly by the manner of his discourse; so much so, indeed, that the latter, after much reflection, ventured upon a little mild remonstrance.

He was met by an axiom he was not prepared for, Latimer laying it down that the first requisite in a sermon was that it should be listened to.

This was more than the Squire's brain—which had no pretension to quickness—could take in all at once. He and his progenitors had been so long under the impression that a sermon was something to doze, if not to snore, through, in the privacy of the family pew.

Somebody or other listened, of course, but the people from the great house gave the example of being there, and the still more important example of not going elsewhere—that was enough.

Little by little, however, the good man had been convinced by his parson; and having once taken to listening, and to being now surprised, now puzzled, and always interested, he got, by degrees, quite to look forward to the Sunday homily, and found himself rather disappointed if the vicar were less exciting and amusing than usual.

For, truth to say, this appetite for what is racy in sermons is one easily developed; and Squire Joe was not long before he went hunting about, on such occasions as he happened to be in London,

in search of the several pulpit celebrities of the metropolis; and we sadly fear the profane thought now and again recurred to his innocent mind as he sat among fashionable congregations,—

“I should like to back my Jack-in-the-Box against that chap for fifty.”

As has been hinted, Mr. Latimer carried almost to the extreme the modern custom of turning what the French term *le prône*, or Sunday discourse, into a mere conference, in which he became more and more inclined to introduce quite Spurgeonian metaphor and anecdote. And the encouragement he met with so to do was incontestable.

The popularity of his style was quickly shown; within a year of his arrival the congregation was doubled, and in time the neighbouring Salem went bankrupt, shut its doors, and was advertised to be let as a storehouse.

People came long distances to listen to the new light; and the knowing ones prognosticated that the Squire would never be able to keep him long.

Then Parson Latimer was comely, if somewhat ascetic of mien, with high-bred white hands, and the privilege of a good Oxford degree.

Not yet forty, and a bachelor, he lost nothing in the eyes of the fairer portion of humanity by his vehement advocacy of a married clergy; and as it is usually incumbent upon a preacher to practise what he preaches, there was no little curiosity among the ladies of the neighbourhood as to who should ultimately prove the favoured one of his choice.

On the present Sunday the Vicar of Studfield took for his text,—

“Desolation of desolation, and all is desolation, because there is no man that thinketh in his heart.”

And he began by drawing a picture of the

general collapse of order and society, making his hearers believe that he positively saw, one by one, all those different regions of the globe, the terrors of which his tongue painted with as much dignity as force.

Mankind—civilized mankind—were rushing upon their doom of impious crime here and eternal torments hereafter, and all because they would not think, or thought wrongly—thought with their proud brains, but no man in his heart.

Suddenly he burst out into Pope, quoting the whole passage from—

“She comes, she comes, the sable throne behold
Of night primæval, and of chaos old”—

down to—

“So thy dread empire, chaos, is restored;
Light dies before thy uncreating word.
Thy hand, great Anarch, lets the curtain fall,
And universal darkness covers all!”

Then, dropping all at once his elevated strain, he asked in the most colloquial tone what were those immediate consequences of “not thinking in the heart,” which gave rise to this appalling state of things; and his hearers were astounded to find that these consequences were political.

To “false thinking” he attributed “socialism, nihilism, pessimism, and all the other dynamitisms—as he called them—which devastate the earth, and which gape as a wide-mouthed visible hell, to swallow up all the churches of whatever denomination, and to flaunt the red banner of Satan through the world.”

Drawing a highly graphic contrast between true and false civilization, he declared that “a gentleman, in the best sense of the word, was of his very essence almost a Christian ready made and

located; that the English species of the genus was the especial outgrowth of the Protestant Reformation.

"Everything which tended to increase their number should be studied, fostered, and was good and holy; while all that led to diminish it spread joy down in Pandemonium, and 'stunk in the nostrils of the Lord.'"

He then went on to declare that monarchies were of Divine origin, and the only ultimate form of government upon which Heaven could permanently smile.

Republics were only allowed to young states as the necessary evils of youth. Till fixity of tenure became possible, they could not be permitted to taste the blessings of what he designated as "the grand quadrilateral fortress" against the devil and all his works—monarchy, aristocracy, primogeniture and entail, four things which he pronounced as inseparable as they were sacred.

"No institution," he said, "either human or Divine, can be permanent without its metropolis on earth. It is so in trivial things, even as in great. Thus astronomy had its Greenwich, money its Stock Exchange, racing its Newmarket, yachting its Cowes, cricket its Lord's, and ladies' fashions have their Paris. So, my friends, manners and customs must have their focus in a court, and gentlemen their leader in a king.

"There was One in heaven, and as no human monarch could manage the whole world effectively, it was the manifest will of Providence that mankind should dwell in peace and happiness under various sovereigns—the viceroys of Divine power on earth."

Finally, not to conclude in too mundane a key, the preacher-lecturer wound up with an eloquent reference to prayer as the one great means, in the power of high and lowly alike, to stem the wave of

confusion about to swallow us, entreating them in tones of touching pathos, and with real tears in his eyes, to practise the holy precept more and more, for that thus they would gain from the Most High the priceless gift of "thinking in their hearts!"

CHAPTER IX.

SUNDAY STILL

VARIOUS reasons are assigned for the vigorous appetite with which the faithful generally find themselves rewarded at luncheon time for having attended church.

Without entering into any of these, it will here suffice to note that to-day's mid-day repast went far to confirm the fact, while throwing no special light upon its causes. Yet, amid these more or less happy, hearty, hungry men and women, boys and girls, there was one sad exception.

Poor Clarence Hood, the too faithful lover, who had got that true illness of love which nothing can cure, sat sadly, silently playing with his food, scarce able to eat a morsel.

Yet he too had been to Divine service, had sat engrossed during the sermon, because all that was earnest had ever special attraction for him; and he had prayed not only well, but hard—desperately.

Women, as a rule, pray more and better than men do; but when really roused by some great anguish, it is probable that they beat us there as upon less sublime fields of competition.

However, a metre for gauging the intensity of devotion does not yet figure among modern inventions.

And as he sat at table in the sunshine—alike of heaven and earth, for the day was bright, and so was the company—but one heart felt and ached for him; but one sympathetic face grew sad in his

contemplation; and these belonged to his aunt-mother, Lady Amaranth.

She was a woman prompt to act when her mind was made up; and she resolved to take the earliest opportunity of having a full explanation, both with the youth himself and with her daughter.

As for Vaia, she too might be said to be sorry for her cousin in a way; but it was in a very weak and unsatisfactory way. She regretted his suffering, and there was an end of her interest in him.

As often as, either in his presence or out of it, the subject obtruded itself upon her, she went through the same mental formula.

As has been already pretty clearly shown, poor Clarence, to whom she was the breath of life, was fast becoming a very incubus to her.

It was only when she could manage to forget him for a span that she was happy—yes, happy.

She told herself again and again that she ought to be miserable, caring, as she knew she was beginning to do, for a man who evidently did not return the feeling; at all events, not as yet. Still, she knew that she felt a new joy in existence which made her hours of night and day balmy, roseate, and indescribable.

And how about her honour, her plighted word, her womanly pity for the torture she was causing, not only by her charms, but as the sequel of her plighted troth!

“Sleep, conscience, sleep!” sang a chorus made up of first love—the passion to enjoy life, and all the sophistries, if such they be—whose joint refrain is, “I can’t help it.”

And now, as all were leaving the room, Lady Amaranth found herself forestalled in her intention, since Hood whispered to her as they crossed the hall,—

"Aunt, I want so much to see you alone; and do, do let it be soon."

"Come up to my boudoir," she said, passing her arm within his, and going up with him to the little sitting-room, which, as the most honoured among the guests, had been awarded to her exclusive use, and joined her bedroom.

"Aunt," he began, as soon as the door was closed, "I want to ask you what I am to do, for this is killing me!" and he commenced to tremble from head to foot.

"Now, my darling boy, do try and be calm," pleaded Lady Amaranth, who had, perhaps, never lost her own calmness in the whole course of her forty-six years of life, although she had had her trials, ay, and her love-pangs to bear, too. She was at this moment seriously alarmed—miserable, in fact—but she only grew the more quiet, the more terribly reposeful. "You have eaten next to nothing."

"I cannot eat."

"You drank no wine."

"Did I not? I forgot it."

"That was foolish of you. There is a glass of sherry in my travelling bag. Here, I will give it to you. Nay, do not stir; you shall wait upon me when I am ill."

"Ill! Yes, you are right. I am ill. About wine, the doctor, good Sir Magnum, says I should take so little."

"As you always have done. That is no reason for taking none. Come, drink this off; you want it."

"Thanks, thanks. Oh, how good you are! Why is your daughter not like you? No, no; I did not mean to begin by abusing her."

"Why not like me, indeed!" thought his aunt, whose opinion of a lover was in exact proportion

to his love. "What can she want more? His father over again. But that was a dream." Yes, she was of those women who want to be loved *à la* whirlwind.

Unfortunately, the whirlwind in question had carried off her sister instead of herself. Yet this too she had borne calmly.

"Well, Clarence," she said, "shall I speak to Vaia or not? I think she means to accept you; she looks so bright and happy, and no doubt all she wants—for Vaia is a very peculiar girl; and, do you know, is often quite a puzzle even to me—is not to be too *brusquée*."

"I am sure she has had time enough."

"You are, of course, impatient; still I should have counselled you to wait, but for the evil effect it is producing on your health. It is evident now this cannot be: you are unable to bear the suspense, therefore it must end, and at once."

"It must and shall," said the young man quietly, but with a wild look his aunt did not like.

"Now then," she said, "will you speak to her, or shall I?"

"We will come to that presently. First, I have a very important thing to say."

He cleared his throat and went on,—

"Had I heard what I am about to tell you from her own lips, I could not, of course, speak of it, even to you—her mother—without her special consent."

"Indeed! What can you mean?"

"Do you really not guess what I am going to say?"

"How can I? You know I never guess anything," exclaimed her ladyship, becoming unconsciously funny all at once.

It was quite true she never did guess, not even the most transparent of riddles. But poor Hood saw nothing comic in anything now.

He said,—

“Aunt, is it possible you do not see that Vaia loves another?”

“Another!” echoed her mother aghast. “My child love some one else, and I not know it! You must be dreaming. Can you—can you mean Jack Heatherly?”

This was too much for the invalid’s—for such he may be called—patience.

“She loves Lord Warrington!”

That this nobleman was not available for matrimonial projects had become an *idée fixe* with Lady Amaranth.

“Warrington!” she exclaimed, almost derisively. “My poor boy, my dear Clarence, you are jealous of everybody.”

“No; only of him.”

“He will never marry any one. He is, as I often tell him, married to himself.”

“I did not say that he loved her. He would, he must, if he could care for anybody but himself. That,—that is just why I am so miserable for her sake as well as my own. God knows how I love her; but mine is not a selfish passion, or, at least, it is not all selfish; and if I felt and knew that her heart was fixed on one worthier than myself, and who loved her in return, or one who had the will and power to make her happy, I hope—I pray that I might have the strength to give her back her freedom; and, banishing myself for ever to some distant land, console my loneliness and my exile with prayers for her welfare, and with sweet thoughts of her felicity; but, instead of that, what do I now see?”

He had risen—every trace of weakness for the moment was gone under the pressure of his excitement—and, crossing over to where Lady Amaranth sat, he stood addressing her, with redundant action

accompanying his words, like some foreign orator appealing to an assembly.

To her renewed entreaty to be calm, he paid no heed.

"I see her," he pursued, "walking calmly and joyfully through a fool's paradise, to what? She might as well love the Antinous in the British Museum. She is wading through perjury and sin—for she has sought no freedom from me—to dash herself against a stone wall; she is rushing, I tell you, to dishonour and misery, to inevitable ruin of body and soul, here and hereafter!"

His growing wildness, although he never spoke loudly, was something fearful to witness; at least, so thought Lady Amaranth, and it was some relief to her when at last he stopped speaking, and seemed to turn his over-wrought energies towards pacing the room.

There was a long silence.

Lady Amaranth thought it well to leave him to himself for at least a minute or two. This space she occupied in asking herself whether it were possible that she could for once have been short-sighted.

Clarence spoke with a degree of conviction which began to shake her theory that he was starting at mere phantoms.

She rose, crossed over to where he stood, looking out at the landscape of which he saw nothing, put her arm round him, kissed his brow, and then, leading him to a seat, said very quietly,—

"There may be yet time. Sit down and let us be practical."

"Yes, yes," he said, "I know that is the only way; yet if you knew what I have been through, how these thoughts madden me, and seem to burn me right up heart and brain. Yes; now dear, let us be practical. It will do no good railing, will it?" And he sat at her side meek as a child.

"Remember," she said, "I have known Lord Warrington from a boy; and though I do not pretend ever to have understood him—they say no one can quite—he is a perfect gentleman, and we are old friends. If my poor girl has so quickly conceived a *passion malheureuse* for him, he cannot surely long fail to see it, and then, as you say, he is certain not to care for her—of course in that way I mean; he will go off—go abroad if necessary, and Vaia will see that it is no use, and may, I confidently hope, come to her senses."

"God grant it, I hope and pray," ejaculated Clarence fervently; "but I fear we leave one most potent fact out of the calculation."

"And what may that be?"

"Lord Warrington's vanity!"

"He has none."

"What! All the fellows say he is the vainest man they know."

"Not all, only the foolish ones—mere jealousy, believe me."

"Well, conceited then, or whatever you like; it all comes to the same thing."

"No, nor conceited either. Come, Clarence," she said smiling, and glad, at any rate, to have got him out of the tragic vein, "you know we women are proverbially better judges of character than you are."

"Granted in the abstract, and I will no longer contest the point with you, aunt, even about this man who has caused me all my misery; but, believe me, he is at least one of those non-marrying men who do not remain single for nothing; and I feel too well, that having won so signal a victory,—made such a conquest,—he will not be the man to abandon the field."

Now, although Lady Amaranth's worldly wisdom made her take every word which fell to-day from her unhappy nephew with several grains of the

proverbial salt, yet the picture he drew of her only,—her beautiful daughter,—put to the base use of decking the triumphant chariot wheels of any hero whatever, could scarcely fail to fill her proud heart with uneasiness.

She had a great liking for, and high opinion of, Hector, but life had taught her that where women are concerned *il ne faut jurer de rien*.

"Certainly it did appear a little strange that his lordship had never seemed even to think of marriage. Then again rumour credited him with many conquests of various kinds.

"Could it be that she was only now making acquaintance for the first time with a new side of the numerous ones which made up his somewhat strange character!"

"Clarence," she said, after a fresh pause, "leave this thing to me. It is, indeed, Vaia who must be spoken to, but I, not you, am the person to do it. Do you not see that to address ourselves—either of us—to Lord Warrington is out of the question?"

"I daresay you are quite right; no doubt you had better, in the first instance, speak to your daughter; but for all that, what would there be so very unheard of in your saying to Warrington—I mean if you thought fit—'You mean nothing, of course; but your friendly intercourse with my daughter might be, has been, misconstrued. She is engaged to her cousin. I approve of the marriage, and for reasons of my own I ask you, as an old friend, to see as little of her as you can for the present.' Why could you not say that?"

"For two very good reasons—Warrington is a sharp, clever man. Such a speech would be equivalent to saying, 'My girl loves you!' or, at least, that I have too much reason to fear so."

"I am afraid you are right," exclaimed Clarence, his face resuming its more pained expression.

"Then," pursued she, "if Vaia learnt or suspected what I had done, it would go hard with you, at whose suggestion she would be sure to think I had acted. Seeing, as we do, what the step must have implied to Lord Warrington's mind, she would simply be furious, and I must say, with good reason."

"Yes, yes; I see it all," said her nephew, again pacing the room, while he kept running his fingers feverishly through his hair. "We must leave him alone, for a time at least—leave him alone. Oh, aunt, to think of the evil, the havoc, a respectable man like that may work in two young lives, and yet keep the esteem, the admiration and adulation of society and the people at large!"

Suddenly he stopped again in front of where Lady Amaranth sat.

"Do you know that man could make me a criminal—a murderer!"

Again that fearful look!

It so absorbed Lady Amaranth that she did not hear a light step which rapidly approached the door and stopped.

Those last words, too, must have been heard without, since for almost the first time throughout the interview, Clarence had spoken with unguarded loudness.

Lady Amaranth rose quickly, and seizing his hands firmly, said, looking him straight in the eyes with a determination which those who knew her best would scarcely have credited her with possessing:

"Come, Clarence, none of that; you know I never love you when you talk wickedness or folly."

"But if he drives me mad, I cannot help it. Then no guilt, no offence of God. I tell you if he wrecks my Vaia's life——"

Here the door opened suddenly, and Lady Amaranth's daughter stood within the room.

CHAPTER X.

VAIA AND HER HERO.

It is the day before the races, and even such of the party as are but languidly interested in the jumping-turf are none the less somewhat influenced by the keenness of the rest.

The little private drama of the day before had been hitherto without any visible result. Vaia had feigned, when her sudden irruption had cut short the tragic duet, to have heard nothing, to see and understand nothing; she had simply delivered a message,—

“Mamma, Mrs. Heatherly wants to know if you would like to walk with her? Most of us are going, and you see I am already equipped.”

Any deliverance was a relief to poor Lady Amaranth, for the scene she was caught enacting with her nephew was growing altogether too alarming.

Immediately on Vaia's entrance, his whole demeanour changed; he collapsed, as it were, and by the time his cousin turned to him with the intention of asking if he too would join the pedestrians, he had left the room.

Lady Amaranth felt quite unequal to any farther scenes that day, as also to the physical fatigue of a country ramble; she knew of old what a little walk meant with the Heatherlys, accompanied by the amount of talk inseparable therefrom. A short solitary stroll round the shrubberies, to be followed by tea and a book, was all her nerves were equal to.

The following day was Monday—that day of waking energies, which seems ever to gird us up for fresh efforts, however unpromising our outlook may appear.

Augustus de Nares and Tom Heatherly, having to ride in the principal event on the morrow, were up by cockcrow, and were either depriving their bodies of the last superfluous “pound of flesh,” with an inexorable exactitude worthy of Shylock and his scales, or were engaged in some of those thousand and one mysteries of the racing stable quite beyond the cunning of any honest female pen.

“We are going to see what we can of the course, Warrington,” said his host after breakfast. “Would you like to ride over to Barrymere with us?”

“Thanks so much, but I think not. I have always lots to do indoors o’ mornings.”

“Just as you please; but you’ll find a knowledge of the country and the jumps add vastly to your enjoyment to-morrow.”

“You know I am no sportsman.”

“No sportsman!” cried the Squire, as if Hector had uttered some piece of profanity; “and since when, pray? I remember you a pretty fair all-round man.”

“Oh, I gave it a fair trial. I don’t believe in not trying everything; but I soon foresaw I should get tired of the whole thing, and so I have—flat-racing alone excepted, and that would be nothing without the sociability, and a little—just a very little—betting.”

“Give up sport!” continued almost to gasp the worthy Heatherly. “Well, I’ve heard tell of sport givin’ men up: bad eyesight will do it, or drink, or fits; but for a man—well, there, it ain’t in nature—there’s some mistake. Come, give it

another try. I say you ain't—you ain't goin' to get yourself naturalized to some foreign nation, are you?"

"No; not quite as bad as that, Heatherly," laughed Hector.

"Then darn me if I understand it."

"Yet it is simple enough. If men find they cannot enjoy the blessing of perfect health without devoting the entire day to violent exercise, let them do it by all means. Their case is not mine. I am proud to say I can either walk my thirty miles straight on end for several days together, or spend a week in the house with my books, pens, and paper, and find not the slightest difference."

"A week in the house?" almost shrieked the Squire. "Well, I never did such a thing in my life, except when I broke my leg teachin' a young horse—we were cub-huntin'—and then I had to have my bed moved to an open window all day long to keep me alive."

"Very likely—force of habit; but, my dear Squire, do remember we are not all alike; surely, the wise plan is to let every man do as he pleases."

But this was not at all comprehensible to Joe Heatherly. He had been brought up to believe that a non-sporting life might be all very excusable—nay, respectable—in poor devils who had to sit at desks all day, and could afford neither the time nor the money—clerks, actors, artists and curates; but that any young man, being born a gentleman, and having the wealth necessary for the purpose, should voluntarily decline to take to hunting,—well, it was to the Squire's mind conclusive evidence "that there was something wrong somewhere."

For the moment he left Warrington to his miserable fate, but determined in his own mind that he would renew the attack upon this de-

generate peer at the first opportunity; and off he galloped with the rest of "the boys" to Barrymere.

Meanwhile, Hector returned to that snug chamber—the study of a man who never studied—which his host had given up to him during the visit, there to spend a couple of hours, as he never failed to do after breakfast, be he in town or country.

There was a voluminous correspondence to go through, social, political, artistic; then several morning papers had to be deftly skimmed of all he really wanted to know.

This done, Warrington would constantly devote a considerable time to solid reading, and he always made notes of what he read, and not unfrequently did a little authorship as well, so that the allotted two hours frequently became four, unless some imperative summons to luncheon cut short his lucubrations.

In the House of Lords he seldom spoke, and then very briefly indeed, never making anything at all like a speech, and generally confining himself to some epigrammatic retort if his party was being attacked, or a suggestion or two when sitting on committees. As yet he has never written a book, but two of his pamphlets upon political crises have made their mark, and his occasional articles in the high-class magazines—generally on kindred subjects—are always signed, and are read alike with interest and amusement, not only by the large circle of those who know him personally, but by the public at large.

To-day among his letters is one at last from his friend Mr. Schippmann, the picture-dealer, just returned from his travels.

As Hector had suspected all along, no such person as his mysterious visitor, "the convict," had ever called upon the illustrious dealer, and

this was the first he had heard of Lord Farnworth's Van de Velde since it was stolen.

And so Lord Warrington let the sunny landscape without lure him vainly from his study, until just as the clock struck one, the figures of Vaia and Marion became visible upon the lawn.

Then, seized with a sudden impulse—a desire at once for fresh air, movement, and the company of these two fair girls—he opened the glass doors of the study, and joined them.

“Are you going to play tennis?” he asked, seeing their white flannel dresses, rackets, and the rest.

“We have just finished playing,” said Marion, “and Vaia has beaten me five sets out of eight.”

“But if you care for a game,” said Vaia, “we are not too tired to play you.”

“By no means,” replied Warrington; “it wants barely an hour to luncheon, and we will just stroll quietly about in the sun. I shan’t allow any sitting, for you are both too warm, though I suppose you will vote me an old woman for my pains.”

A little desultory talk followed, and presently “Maid Marion” stopped to pick a flower, then took to running about by herself; and when at last she left them, it was so cleverly done that Hector, at least, never knew she was gone.

There was a silence. Vaia did not know what to say. To another, anything that came uppermost would have done, for indeed she had a ready tongue; but when with this man she felt afraid. She did not want him to think her empty or frivolous—no, nor priggish and blue—so she held her peace.

He, on the other hand, was so very much at his ease that he fell into a reverie about something quite different, only after a minute or two waking up to the fact that he ought to talk.

"I should like to see Studfield in the full bloom of summer," he said, "or even of early autumn. I fancy it would hardly ever be too hot down here. Have you ever done so, Miss Temple?"

"Yes; we were here last August. It was quite delightful."

"I never saw a place more rich in trees. They are my passion. I even prefer them to flowers."

"Yet your brother was telling me your house in London is full of flowers."

"Well, you see, it would be difficult to fill it with trees; and then one may love a thing very honestly, and yet prefer something else—something, perhaps, beyond our reach. I am not so terribly sensitive as a certain poet-friend of mine—an Italian—who cannot endure to be alone with flowers; and why, do you suppose?"

"Because he is afraid of picking them all at once, and having none left?"

"No," said Warrington amused; "although that is quite as clever an answer to the enigma. His reason is that they remind him too painfully of the absence of women."

"How very gallant! But is it not rather affected?"

"I should think so, no doubt, in an Englishman; but my friend Hillorio is the simplest of beings. Italians—men or women—seldom are affected."

"And," pursued Vaia, "do you know why you care more for trees than flowers, or is it merely a taste you cannot account for, like fancying one person more than another without being able to tell why?"

"But I always can tell. To analyze my feelings is, to me, one of the chief delights of life; and probably I carry the practice to an undue extent."

"I am afraid I do not understand."

"It entails too much self-contemplation perhaps."

"From the habit of dissecting every emotion? I think I see. But you have still to tell me about the trees."

"Yes; to me, then, they speak a broader, deeper language than flowers. They are so much larger—address you from a greater distance. They are—how shall I express it? They are as the voice of the storm compared to an orchestra, or—or a better simile, I think, will be to say that trees are to flowers as sculpture to painting."

"Oh, so they are. What a good idea! But I am sure it would never have struck me unless you had put it into my head."

"Oh, you cannot tell that it might not have done so."

He spoke throughout, with all the simplicity he had just praised in his Italian friend, and it was this which especially struck and charmed Vaia.

If he used fine phrases, it was because to him, at least, they were the best he could find at the moment for conveying his meaning; and while, on the one hand, he never dreamt of choosing them because they were high-flown, it was equally far from the nature of the man to reject or suppress them because they chanced to be so. In mixed company, indeed, this thought might have influenced him, but not with her. He already held Miss Temple's calibre as above the mean error of thinking him conceited, and talking for empty effect.

And still they walked on, and had now got free of shrubberies and flower-gardens, and were fairly launched into the park beyond, with its witchery of ferns, deer, and stately oaks.

"Look!" he said, unconsciously laying his hand on her arm, while with the other he pointed. "Look at that sycamore on the brow of the hill. It is scarcely in leaf, yet see how impressive already is

the massing of its foliage. There is no tree at all like it in that respect. It is as classic as if its clusters were hewn out of marble. Now to go on with my analogy. You will find, Miss Temple, if ever you come to know me better, that I am a terrible man for analogy, for it is with me the magic key to all knowledge. 'Why, I will talk to thee about this theme'—not as Shakespeare says, 'until my eyelids will no longer wag,' but until yours would most surely wag with sleep."

"I will tell you when they do," she rejoined archly. "Pray go on. We will bear to the right, however, skirting the home plantation, and then we shall not be late for luncheon."

"Well, colour; and now I mean real colour, local or reflected—not colour in its higher sense of *chiaroscuro*, as we have it in a Rembrandt etching, or the photograph of a Murillo. Colour is a delightful thing in its way; but it is still a distractor—at all events, I very often find it so, from beauties even nobler and higher still. Now, nearly all trees are green—to take nature before art, which is a precedence I do not inwardly accord her—but we will not go into that now."

"Oh, but do. To interrupt you for a moment, where is the picture that can compare to a real sun-bathed view of nature? Take this one before our eyes."

"I am afraid I prefer the painting, but very likely it is bad taste. Anyhow, there is more to be said on the side of art than—pardon me for saying so—you may be quite aware of at present. I was saying that as trees are nearly all green, and statues mostly white, we are enabled to concentrate our attention more exclusively upon their form—to listen, if I may be allowed the expression, with the eyes, to what I call the eloquence of shape—than can be the case either with paintings or flowers. Their wealth of form is, indeed, beyond

anything which an eye not greedy in these things ever suspects or dreams of; for, as you move round either, you find at each eighth of an inch of your progress a fresh picture multiplied again whenever you raise or lower your head."

"You are teaching me a great deal, Lord Warrington. It will amuse me in future to put all this to the test; only you will defend me from ridicule, won't you, if I am laughed at on being caught walking round and round a tree?"

"Oh, yes. I will explain the whole matter to the ignorant mocker, I promise; but, tell me, do you really dislike ridicule so much?"

"Oh, more — I was going to say more than anything, but that, I suppose, is not true, and would hardly be right."

"I have often been told that I myself am unduly callous to it."

"You surprise me."

"Yes?"

"I ought not to tell you why."

"I give you leave."

"Then I will. It is because people say of you — You are sure you won't mind?"

"I *may* mind, but still I wish to hear."

"Well, that you are a glutton after praise."

"I am—I own it."

"Then surely that would imply——"

"I see your drift. Yes, it would, on the *per contra* principle, imply the fear of ridicule originally; but there are two causes against its lasting."

"And they are——"

"Philosophy, and that study of the art of living to which all sensible men—men who have any brains at all, I mean—devote much of their thoughts. I allude to the habit of attending intently to all that is pleasant, and ignoring, as far as in us lies, what is the reverse."

"What a charming theory! But, seriously, do you find it practicable?"

"To a limited extent only. But that is no reason for not adopting it."

"Some people might think," said Vaia, after a little consideration, "that so much theorizing and living by rule robbed life of its chief attraction. Oh, do not think that such is my view," she added eagerly.

"Then," said Hector smiling, "let such people leave my plan alone."

"Dear me!" exclaimed his companion suddenly; "how very unlike you are—I mean in all this—to your brother!"

"Yes, indeed, utterly. Augustus declares that recklessness is the key to enjoyment; but, mark this, for I am sure of it—he pretends to enjoy life, but he does not, while I pretend to enjoy it, and I do."

At this point their ramble was suddenly brought to an end by an iron tongue from a belfry—a kind of alarm bell, indeed—with which it was the time-honoured custom at Studfield to summon all stragglers home for the mid-day repast.

CHAPTER XI.

LADY AMARANTH SPEAKS.

LORD WARRINGTON and Miss Temple very naturally entered the dining-room together, and being a few moments behind time, more than one meaning glance was exchanged between various members of the company.

In a country house it is always looked upon as a kind thing to the rest of the party when two of their number are good enough to make themselves in any way conspicuous, and the above-named glances plainly said,—

“Did you see? Is it a case? Now where have they been?” And so forth, according to the bent of each.

Hector, of course, did not mind—he so seldom minded anything.

As for Vaia, she was becoming, with each breath she drew, a new being—leading a fresh life in an unknown atmosphere. She, too, thought there was no one there whose eyes she would heed, let them look what they might at her for coming in with Lord Warrington, until she encountered those of her cousin fixed searchingly upon her.

Poor Clarence! It may sound incredible, but Vaia had forgotten his very existence.

Although it was no sort of pleasure to her to have it thus brought forcibly before her notice, she smiled and nodded to him, as she might have done to some little boy—a courtesy which the sullen adorer scarcely deigned to return.

That young lady, however, had mentally ejaculated,—

“Oh, my dear cousin, what a bore you are!” and betook herself to satisfying the cravings of a well-earned appetite.

It was Warrington who, as in duty bound, purveyed to her material needs; for the servants had left the room, and even as Vaia partook of what he brought her, she went on mentally with her endless occupation of drawing contrasts between the man who loved her and the man she loved.

They were indeed as the very poles asunder.

“I wonder,” she asked herself, “if Lord Warrington could ever love in the least as poor Clarence does?” No; she could not conceive it. “Could he grovel at any woman’s feet, hanging with a life-and-death anxiety upon the word which was to doom him to die there of despair, or to arise feeling that not one of all the kings of earth was his equal?”

And again she answered her own question in the negative.

Then came the consideration whether she were glad or sorry that it should be so.

Would she, if she could, like to see this man who so fascinated her—she could not tell why, and quite in spite of herself—would she wish to have him literally at her own feet under such circumstances? And at first it did seem for a moment that to possess him heart and soul under any conditions would be too great a joy to forego. But a little more reflection convinced her that she would not desire it—not be nearly so happy with him humbled before her as she was at this instant, with scarce a glimmer of hope, because then he would not be the same man.

He whom she loved must remain for ever much as she saw him now—proud, unruffled, even some-

what out of all reach, to be impressed, charmed, perhaps, but not conquered.

If he turned into a Clarence Hood, she would care for him no more.

Then she told herself that was absurd, because he could not, under any circumstances, become a Clarence Hood, and she was right.

Presently she awoke from her reverie to what was going on around her—not all at once, but gradually, as one is awakened from sleep by some persistent sound, which, for a while, is mixed up in a mysterious way with the subject of a dream.

Such chance words as “thrown him over,” “broken faith,” and so forth, fell only half recognised upon her inattentive ear, with no other effect than making more irksome the thinking out of the problem upon which she had been intent. Then the sentence, delivered in almost tragic tones by Clarence, who was seated nearly opposite to her, made her give a slight start, and she grew fully alive to the fact that an animated discussion was going on around her.

“A woman who can deliberately jilt one man, to whom she has pledged her word, to bestow it on another, is a criminal, and should be brought to justice.”

Vaia fancied the words were hurled at her, but she kept her eyes upon her plate.

“Have you read the case, Miss Temple?” said Miss Bagley.

“No. What case?” asked Vaia simply.

“Knowles *versus* Ferguson, in to-day’s paper. It is really most amusing.”

“Pray tell me; I love a good trial.”

“Well, it is a breach of promise; but what is rather uncommon, it is brought by a man, which is of course always infinitely absurd.”

“It is not done in what we call good society,”

put in Hood; "but as for the absurdity, I confess I fail to see it."

"My dear Clarence," said Lady Amaranth, "it may be equally wrong, I grant. An honest man who has really given his whole heart may die of having it broken as well as a girl; but his applying to a court of justice for comfort in the shape of damages, very deservedly covers a man with ridicule, and it must always strike the world in that light."

"And what is the end, the verdict? I have not noticed it in the papers," asked Lord Warrington.

"The jury," said the Squire, "evidently agree with Lady Amaranth, for they award the interesting plaintiff—a hairdresser by trade—one farthing damages."

"I have read every word of the evidence," said Hood, "and it is evident the girl—or rather, the woman, for she is two-and-twenty—behaved as badly as it is possible to do. She is possessed of a considerable sum of money for her position in life. She had been engaged for more than a year to Knowles, whom she had induced to give up a thriving business in one town to start a very precarious one in another. All goes well, and the day is fixed, the wedding ring bought, when Miss Ferguson happens to meet another young man at a tea-party. In less than a week she discovers she prefers number two to number one, and within a fortnight she has married him."

"Very hard on the first lover, I grant," said the eldest Miss Heatherly; "but a woman has a sort of proverbial right to change her mind."

"Wrong can never be right," pursued Clarence, warming more and more with his subject. "If such conduct is to go unpunished, what is the use of having laws? Society will not punish her. I mean by society, her equals in station, of course.

To my mind, no honest woman should speak to her or let her enter their doors. It would be so in the case of a man."

"And quite right," said several ladies at once.

"Quite right," echoed the Count, "but the same offence in a woman can never be more than venial."

"But why?" exclaimed Clarence. "Is not this the way to render them less and less honourable? It is not even kind to them, for it deprives them of all standard by which to be guided, and degrades them by encouraging the world to expect from them neither truth, good faith, nor responsibility."

"*Hélas !*" said De Turgý, "there is too much truth in what you urge. *Mais que voulez-vous ?* The world is made so, and so it must remain. Eh ? Warrington, you are a *philosophe*, yet do not join in this interesting discussion. Tell us, am I not right ?"

"There is no saying," said Hector, thus appealed to, "what changes time may bring about; but the world seems for the present to have quite settled what virtues are required and what failings excused in men and women respectively. A lady huntress who rides boldly to hounds may have her admirers, but even to them her courage may appear rather a superfluous article, while the least spirited of us men does not dare to be a coward. A woman who has no piety is repellent to all in a very different degree to any man not given to saying his prayers; but let the latter be convicted of a lie, it will go far harder with him than if the same abomination had issued from softer lips."

"To be sure," said De Turgý. Then, turning again to Clarence, he said: "I am afraid you must give up your theories, respectable though they are, or at least learn to see them ignored on every side. Indeed, I suspect the matter is less superficial and false than you think, and that it finds its *raison d'être* in the inexorable logic of things."

Immediately after luncheon, Lady Amaranth, having collected her energies for the occasion, summoned her daughter to the same apartment in which, on the previous day, Vaia had interrupted the scene between aunt and nephew.

Miss Temple, it need hardly be said, was in no wise surprised at this move. It was the inevitable consequence of what she herself had done, and—well—those who sow the storm must reap the whirlwind.

She dreaded and detested the coming interview; but since it must be, “the sooner come, the sooner over,” and as she mounted the stairs in obedience to her mother’s behest, some thought doubtless passed through her mind much resembling that time-honoured formula which is credited with having saved from madness scores upon scores of struggling country managers, when theatrical bothers are more than usually crushing with them.

“Midnight must come at last.”

Have you ever noticed the totally different terms upon which parents find themselves with such grown-up children as are financially independent of them, and those who are not?

It is a human study not devoid of interest and instruction.

Briefly to define the two cases. When the old bird has not the main control of the purse-strings, the discussion is a mere conference. The parent having that tremendous power, it degenerates into a simple manifesto, too often an ultimatum, leaving the helpless youngster no choice.

We trust that Lady Amaranth would, under any circumstances, have always conducted herself like a gentlewoman and a mother; but she was none the less careful to bear in mind the above described notable distinctions in all her relations with Vaia.

The whip hand is a privilege but few of us would like to forego if we had the choice.

"Vaia, my dear," began her mother, "you of course know what I wish to speak to you about. Our dear Clarence is so unhappy—indeed, that is no name for it—at your still deferring to give him your—I hardly know how to describe it; for, according to his account, you seem to have made the oddest arrangement—he says that although you would not consider yourself engaged until he had taken a farther specified time to reflect, you gave him your promise, if I understand rightly, on a certain condition, which he has fulfilled."

"Oh, yes, mamma; it amounts to that," said Vaia. "I forget the words, but that is just how the matter stood a few days ago."

"And now?"

"I know I appear to be behaving very badly."

"You appear! Vaia, this is a serious matter. You are nearly three-and-twenty, and at that age I quite recognise that you have a right to act for yourself in most things. But in this one—your engagement to Clarence—I should not be doing my duty as a mother were I not to interfere."

"But, by all means, mamma dear, I assure you I quite expect—I—I look for it, and"—and here she smiled—"I approve of it."

"Thanks, love; you see it is not merely on your own account, but it is quite plain that this suspense is more than poor devoted Clarence can bear. When I say this, you must not imagine I consider him an invalid. *Sir Magnum Bonum*——"

"Yes, mamma, I remember. We can pass over all that—also any allusion to the idea that I take any pleasure in making him suffer."

"Quite so, Vaia. I was certain of it, and I told him so. But it was unnecessary, for I found he never accused you of anything of the kind. Now, may I ask you if you have finally made up your mind?"

"I have, and irrevocably."

"To keep your word, or to break it?"

"There is no use trying to soften what nothing can soften. I can never marry my cousin!"

Lady Amaranth bit her lip, but only said very quietly,—

"Oh!"

She was furious—the more so because she rightly saw that to shake Vaia one hair's-breadth in her resolution was hopeless. Pride, policy, high breeding, all forbade her to break out; but to reply gently for some moments to such an announcement was beyond even Lady Amaranth's power. She took refuge, therefore, in silence. Her daughter should, at least, not know the extent of her irritation and defeat. Yes, defeat. Here were her hopes of years deceived, her long-matured plans blown to the winds. She was wounded in her tenderest point—Clarence Hood's good fortune and happiness. Now he would probably wither and die.

If she wanted to punish Vaia, she was taking by far the surest way.

Few things are more galling than not to get a scolding when deserved and wished for.

The girl was the first to speak.

"Mother, are you very angry with me?"

"Not at all."

"Oh, I am with myself; not for what I am doing now, for I cannot help it—I should go mad if I married my cousin; but for having understood my own feelings so little as to accept him."

"He must be told at once."

"Will you tell him? Oh, if you think I am selfish in putting this task upon you, I will do it myself; I am sure I deserve it."

"No; I will tell him if you wish."

"Oh, mamma, how good you are! I expected such a scene, knowing how you had set your heart upon this marriage."

"I wished for the happiness of you both. But how silly you must be to have expected a scene. You know scenes are not in my way."

"Tell him," said Vaia, coming to kneel at her mother's lap with clasped hands, a most unaccustomed proceeding on her part, "tell him my reasons——"

"My dear, what can they matter, unless, of course, it be in his power to remove them?"

"Remove? Oh, no; he can do nothing."

"Then I think, dear (it was a very chilly dear), any reasons would be an insult."

"But he will naturally want to know," urged Vaia, whose expansion increased as she found she had none to dread from her mother.

"Then I must refer him to you; but if you are wise, you will say as little as possible. When you mean to treat any one badly, never explain."

"Then you are sure I am treating him badly?" asked the girl, with amusing *naïveté*; for she was taken in by Lady Amaranth's calmness.

The latter turned upon her a glance wherein a ray of humour mingled with contempt.

"Surely you were not under the delusion that you are treating him well?"

Then Vaia hid her face in her hands, and burst out sobbing against Lady Amaranth's knees. Not that her secret—

"Nourished by outward warmth, by inward sap,
Had fallen spontaneous in a mother's lap;"

but that poor Vaia felt so utterly shut out in the cold.

"If you are angry with me, why don't you tell me so?" she got out at last.

"Why should I be angry?" replied her ladyship, without the slightest attempt at a caress, or any solace to her tears.

She could have cried too, but they would have been tears of rage. She said to herself,—

“If I were a common person, I should like to beat you.”

Then aloud, and in her most placid accents,—

“I may be sorry for *him*, poor fellow, but he has alone the right to be angry. Come, get up, dear, and go and wash away those absurd tears. I never can make out why people do things that they cry over. If it makes them wretched, why do them?”

“Oh, mamma, pray, pray let me explain. I am not nearly so bad as you think me, and I cannot bear to appear worse than I deserve in your eyes. I feel absolutely certain I could not make Clarence even tolerably happy.”

“Oh my dear child, the old story! Do you not see that people could always say that, and then there would be an end to all honour in engagements. A man might jilt a new girl at the end of every season. You really amuse me.”

“I know, I know. I am not defending the principle nor myself; but there may be special cases—cases when such a plea is not used as a cover for treachery.”

Lady Amaranth rose.

“Vaia, I can listen to no more of this. Whatever course you take, I shall stand by you, of course. It is my place. Only, do not hope to tamper with my principles, because, thank Heaven! you would not succeed.”

With this, her ladyship swept out of the room, happy at least to think that if any one chose to displease Amaranth Temple, they must pay the price.

CHAPTER XII.

A NEW GAME.

THE hour before dinner upon this same day brought with it the very last elements which were to swell the Studfield race party, and that elastic house fairly creaked and cracked under the strain which was almost more than even its far-famed capacity could bear.

Among these latter-day guests was one who had never been there before, and was no less a person than the celebrated gentleman-rider, Mr. Nathaniel Jones.

There could be no doubt as to the rider—the racing calendar vouched for that—though there might be considerable doubt about the “gentleman” part of the designation.

No one seemed more prone to entertain these misgivings than the little man himself; for he hardly ever opened his mouth unless spoken to, and in no way gave you the idea that he had anything to do with the party or the party with him. He was the friend of Augustus de Nares, and was to ride the third favourite, owned by a trainer, in the big race the next day.

In the drawing-room before dinner he never left his introducer’s side, unless he succeeded for a moment in getting behind him.

Even in his evening attire there was a vague horsiness as palpable as it was difficult to define.

He wore—alone of all the men present—not only the abomination of a handkerchief stuck in his

waistcoat, but the objectionable article was a coloured silk one of *cerise* and white, which were, it subsequently transpired, the racing colours in which he was to steer his mount next day.

Viewed from a little distance—especially by candle-light—he looked like a boy, with his small slight form and rather carrotty stubble hair; but on a closer inspection, he might be taken for any age.

His yellow wizen face, ornamented with several frightful scars or gashes, was utterly devoid of intellectuality, and its only expression was a certain resoluteness conveyed by the mouth and chin.

His nose was flattened like that of a prize-fighter, his small beady eyes were deep set in his head, and the mouth, quite devoid of lips, and never allowing even the faintest glimmer of a tooth to be seen, were best compared to the slit in a poor-box; any way, it was quite as close and quite as difficult to get anything out of that was worth having.

“Nat,” as his friends called him—while the professional jockeys, by common consent, accorded him brevet rank as the “Captin,”—was a noted performer on the flat, as well as in what the common people term “jump races”; and although he never owned a horse in his life, he was always glad of a mount with any hounds he happened to be near, and men were only too glad to entrust their “novices” to the hands of so experienced a rider, especially of one whose hunting weight, “all told,” was well under ten stone.

He has just been introduced to Miss Bagley, with a view to business—that is to say, that he was to take her down to dinner.

His bow vaguely reminded one of that stoop over a horse's neck which jockeys make such liberal use of, especially during the preliminary

canter, and Mr. Jones' clenched hands swung forward at the same time as if they were according to some eager steed a few inches of his head.

"Fresh this evenin'," were the only words he uttered, and although the young lady made several attempts at starting a topic, avoiding with natural good taste any reference to what seemed so too plainly "his calling," for the present she failed to elicit from him anything but "Yes" and "No."

Suddenly her attention was diverted from its unpromising object by a strange sight indeed.

"Good gracious, Mr. Jones," she exclaimed, "what on earth is Count de Turgy about?"

Then the parchment visage slowly relaxed into a smile of partial intelligence as her cavalier replied,—

"Kind o' sweepstakes, looks like."

And so it did, for the bearded foreigner, with many bows and smiles, was threading his way among the company to a chorus of subdued giggling and exclamations of surprise, as, hat in hand, he solicited the sum of one shilling from each male member of the very large party.

"One shilling, by authority of Madame. *Pour la nouvelle concurrence.* Keep your eyes open, see all you can, and you may carry off the first prize, one half-sovereign, or second prize, five shillings. Come, come, gentlemen, your money, your money; you will not refuse me the confidence of one shilling each, at the request of our amiable hostess. If you have not that sum in your pocket, see, I lend you."

And of course, thus appealed to, no one refused to compete for the mysterious prizes.

Dinner went off with a *brio* and success which the one or two more or less heavy hearts present were ineffectual outwardly to impair. There was at first an impression among the men that all the

ladies were in the secret of the Count's hat, but it soon became evident that he and Mrs. Heatherly were alone initiated; nor did "mine host" lose such an opportunity of cracking many a merry, albeit unwitty, joke anent the tortures of jealousy, to which this suspicious alliance between so handsome a man and the hitherto faithful wife of his bosom inspired him.

Anything is good enough to laugh at when people are in the humour, and Squire Joe's sallies were received with acclamations of enjoyment.

The ladies were in an unusual hurry to leave the room, having understood that their burning curiosity was to be satisfied shortly after.

The "New Game," as the Count called it, was to "take precedence," as they say in Parliament, of all the other business of pleasure on that evening. "It was a game," he told them, "that differed from any other ever known, because when once you know it, you cannot play at it."

He at the same time proclaimed himself the inventor.

"Oh, it is very silly, very. It is in truth silly, silly, but Madame had asked him for something to *faire passer le temps*; and he had nothing better."

The gentlemen had not been ten minutes by themselves when De Turgy, whose eye had been thoughtfully roaming from one to the other, quietly rose, and going to Clarence Hood, said,—

"You look bored with this racing talk, and are drinking no wine. I will begin with you."

The poor fellow was scarcely in tune for games of any sort, but it is the forfeit all pay for staying at a country house—be it twenty times Liberty Hall—that the will of its mistress, when she chooses to exert it, is law, and must be obeyed.

Accordingly, after the slightest attempt at "I say, can't you leave me out, De Turgy? I am

afraid I shall prove a wet blanket," he allowed himself to be mercilessly dragged off.

The Count had enjoyed much love in the course of his forty years of life, but had never for a moment suffered from it, and he was therefore no sympathizer with its victims. Besides, as he airily explained, "if he once allowed recalcitrants, the fun was at an end."

Conducting his prisoner into Squire Joe's study, he presented him with a sheet of foolscap paper, on which was a list of all the ladies in the house, written out in a bold, clear hand, by the English governess.

Clarence was then presented with a pen, and told he must describe, opposite to each name, what its owner was wearing this evening—colour, material, shape, jewels, head-dress—the "more the better."

"But I remember nothing about it," Clarence exclaimed helplessly.

"Then invent, my dear boy. There is just precisely where the joke finds itself. If people put all down correctly, it would be *ennuyeux à dormir debout*."

And so he left him, and, fetching his next victim, shut him up in the library. Having locked a third safely in the morning room, the energetic Count returned to his friend Hood.

"I forgot to tell you Clarence, *mon cher*, that you are limited to five minutes. Come—*allons*—what have you said?"

And he took up the paper.

"But they are half blanks!"

"Well, I really can't help it. I know nothing of ladies' dress."

"Yet here is one described in every detail!"

"Oh, yes, I know; but that is my cousin, and—well—of course, I have seen the dress before."

"Ah, *naturellement*, it must be that." Then he

added, with indescribable meaning and *engouement*, the expressive term "*polisson*."

"Here, Count, take the pen, and do you fill them up yourself."

"What!" exclaimed De Turgy in horror, "you propose to me that I shall cheat—and in a game of money! Betray the confidence accorded me by all this honourable company! *Allons donc*."

Thus adjured, the wretched Clarence wrote down at random the first thing in the way of attire and personal decoration which came to his brain. The Count glanced it over to be sure there was nothing "unintentionally inconvenient," as he termed it, and said,—

"All right. Now get along to the ladies."

"And if they question me?"

"Tell them everything you like. Mrs. Heatherly is explaining the game to them for me;" and so he despatched him.

Acting similarly by the others, three at a time, the fifteen competitors were all sent into the drawing-room within half an hour; the Count, of course, taking possession of each paper before emancipating his captive.

Bitter was the disgust and even disappointment of the majority, on entering the room, to see how wildly at fault their individual impressions had been; and several of the number would gladly have forfeited a hundred shillings to escape the ridicule with which the next few minutes must, they thought, inevitably cover them.

The ladies openly showed their delight on reading all this on the countenance of each unwilling aspirant as he entered. Never was anything funnier, they declared, than the clear way in which all the men betrayed that for the nonce they had no eyes for the fairest faces, their anxious glances being entirely absorbed by the ladies' clothes.

The Squire alone was not included in the game, but sat by a most amused spectator, yet feeling rather ashamed at faring so much better than his guests.

This was unavoidable, however, for Mrs. Heatherly, while gratefully accepting the Count's suggested mystification, had made but one condition—that her husband's sanction should be obtained, as she never took the smallest step without consulting him.

"How very stupid!" thought De Turgy, "*mais c'est bien de son pays*," and he submitted with his usual good grace.

And now came the *dénouement*. With that dramatic instinct natural to most of his nation, the Count knew that as each luckless victim was being put to the torture, that is, while he heard his wretched attempts read out by De Turgy as high-priest, the whole zest of the fun depended upon every one having a full and clear view of the poor wretch's face.

He therefore arranged the company in a semi-circle at one end of the room, placed each man in turn upon a high seat raised on an extemporary dais right in front of them, and standing himself on the carpet beside his victim he read out the fatal paper.

Five of the youngest and prettiest of the ladies having been empanelled on one side of the half-circle to act as a jury, the business commenced in earnest with the trial of the Rev. Ambrose Latimer, who had vainly pleaded his cloth to save him from the ordeal.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the Frenchman, "our reverend friend declares——"

"No, I don't declare," protested Latimer.

"Silence! Prisoner," cried his tormentor, "declares that Lady Bagley wears a yellow dress with pink bows."

At this preposterous announcement, there arose such a general burst of laughter that the Count had to wait a considerable time for quiet to be restored.

Her ladyship was in violet silk with tulle illusion trimmings of the same hue.

He resumed,—

“That wonderful garment, entirely of his own pious invention”—another polite roar—“is square cut.” It happened to be quite *décolletée*, that lady of sporting proclivities being justly proud of her shoulders, “and he farther has the modesty to assert——”

“I only wrote, I ‘thought,’” groaned the Vicar.

“Silence, prisoner! To assert that her ladyship wears a red bird of some kind in her hair. He doubtless means a flamingo.”

Her only head-dress was a plait of hair, very like her own, arranged *en diadème*, in which was woven a string of real pearls.

The luckless clergyman was not much more fortunate with the toilettes of the other dames and damsels, but soon found himself kept fairly in countenance by the egregious blunders of his successors.

The Count made no secret of hurrying matters to a conclusion, ostensibly, so he declared, because he knew all the young people were dying to dance; but really from his knowledge that of all things which will not bear the test of being drained to the dregs, the comic excitement of a new *petit jeu* can stand it the least.

Confining himself, then, with his native tact, to such of his catalogues as were either absurdly wrong or wonderfully near the mark, he got quickly and successfully through his task.

His best man of all he had shrewdly reserved to the very last, well knowing that after him nothing else would “go worth a farthing,” as the saying is.

And who should this exceptional male creature, this observant being, turn out to be?

Why, no other than that stupid-looking little “cad,” Mr. (Captain) Nat Jones, the gentleman-rider

He was indeed so accurate that the jury gave him the first prize without leaving the box.

At a gaping interval, Augustus de Nares was a bad second; but as the Count pointed out, in an ordinary "field" he would have been accounted good.

"Nat" positively hardly made an essential mistake, and the Squire compared him to the celebrated dumb parrot who thought the more.

But Lady Bagley was probably on the right track towards an explanation when she said,—

"It is not so wonderful after all, for Conny tells me the little man knows the racing colours of every horse-owner in the three kingdoms."

And Nat himself was so elated at this new kind of success, that under the excitement he actually remarked facetiously that he had "landed the event" and "collared the swag," and then he went off straight to bed, as he did soon after ten every night of his life; for he never danced, and probably did not know how—never smoked, never drank or raked, but lived entirely for the preservation of his nerve, and so no wonder he preserved it.

The Vicar, too, beat a retreat, but all the rest were soon in high revel, and the clock struck two before any one thought of giving up so bright a present to seek vigour in sleep for an uncertain future.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE RACES.

THE county is very proud of the Draycliffe meeting, although the interest it inspires is admittedly more local than general.

It has always been the custom for the neighbouring magnates to fill their houses for the occasion, and the very great swell of all, the Duke of the district, who in this instance happens to be only a Marquis—the Marquis of Northdown,—usually gives a grand ball upon the night of the second day.

All our friends at Studfield are looking forward to this brilliant wind-up to their festivities, and it is to be feared the report that Squire Joe said “that no sequel to a jumping festival could be more appropriate than a hop”—albeit resting solely upon the testimony of his fourth girl—is not without foundation.

In fact there would appear to be hardly any limit to the audacity of the jokes which this typical *paterfamilias* deems quite good enough for the little ones.

Most of the children mean to see the race by hook or by crook; they are such sly diplomatists that they are always checkmating their betters.

Those who have been refused by mamma, have managed to extort a promise from papa, and *vice versa*.

The manner in which they get conveyed to the course is also characteristic. First, the break, which will be an omnibus to-morrow night—the barouche, which was quite new when the Heatherlys

married, and the remaining vehicles, are closely packed with adults; and when these vehicles will hold no more, a sprinkling of children is thrown over them, like flowers on a banquet.

Lord Warrington has fallen a victim during the last few days to the liberal charms of a little female urchin named Peachie, and she is undeniably in love with him.

Peachie did not happen to tumble upon her lord when the scattering took place; so she has crawled along a human road of knees, laps, and other children, to the corner where he sits, and is now hugging him with as much vigour as effrontery.

Peachie is just six.

Hector always declares and firmly believes that he hates both children and dogs; and, no doubt, if given his choice, would elect to find neither in any house he is about to visit.

At the same time, it is one of the many contradictions in his rather complex character, that he is never brought within the influence of a tolerable specimen of either of these social pests without at once becoming its slave.

To his credit, however, be it spoken, that he has good taste enough to be rather ashamed of the weakness, and to hide it as much as possible.

We all have learnt that in a grown-up party a child or a dog is the refuge of the destitute, and only the very obtuse, or those who are foolishly indifferent to what others think, will incur the loss of prestige which is entailed by paying too much attention to either one or the other.

Peachie being only six, Vaia is not jealous. On the contrary, it gives her pleasure to discover that her hero can be affectionate to a child, although she does not pause to analyze the reason of her gladness.

It is a lovely drive upon a lovely day. The air upon the sunny downs is bracing, and long before

it will be decent even to allude to luncheon, several ladies of the party, who allowed the general excitement to prevent their concentrating their great minds upon breakfast, are asking themselves how they will ever be able to hold out till after "the big event" without getting anything to eat.

Children, of course, have neither delicacy nor conscience. They look upon the racecourse chiefly as a dining-room, and are clamorous about hampers almost before they are through the lodge gates.

And now the carriages have taken up their position just on the brow of a slight hill opposite the winning post, whence a fairly good view of the greater part of the course is commanded. This coigne of vantage is of rather limited extent, and, as a consequence, densely crowded.

Here, too, are congregated those multifarious performers of music and everything else, who attend races with the avowed purpose of distracting attention from them.

But the saddling bell for the first contest—a hurdle race only—directs the attention of all the carriage folk to business. Up go the numbers, and every speculative mind is busy with them and with the card. Lady Bagley sends Harry Heatherly across to the ring upon a mysterious errand, the details of which are conveyed to his ear in what looks like the whispering language of love, but is nothing of the kind, and yet fills that extremely young man with a delirious sense of responsibility and importance.

The indefatigable Count is once more collecting money from the party, but he this time takes from ladies as well as men, and the amount has risen to half a crown. This has nothing to do with the hurdle race, but is a lottery sweepstakes upon the second item on the programme—the chief steeplechase of the meeting.

The horses, as represented by little folded papers bearing their numbers, are all shaken up in Mrs. Heatherly's reticule, an old-fashioned appendage which requires much previous emptying, and then Peachie is instructed to insert her little chubby fist, and present one in turn to each subscriber.

The first, she is told, is for Miss Bagley, but she insists on giving it to "mammy"! Then so many voices call out that this is informal, as to cause in Peachie a shyness and fear which she never feels in love, and in her confusion and her hesitation as to whether she will take refuge in a burst of tears or not, she is with great difficulty prevented from swallowing the horse she has drawn, like some experienced culprit in his endeavour to suppress the damning evidence of his guilt.

By a strange coincidence Marion draws Auriole, which Augustus is to ride.

By the way, this excellent young lady does not at all approve of her growing partiality for the scapegrace De Nares. She is surprised to find that self-approval or condemnation go for nothing in the matter—a shocking state of things of which her girlhood has hitherto had no inkling.

She has never heard of the passage—

"Why did she love him? Curious fool, he still!
Is human love the growth of human will?"

She cares for a man who, by his own account, is not a Christian; and by that of others, no better than he ought to be! It is monstrous—she will associate with him no more!

Then he has only to say, "Shall we have a turn round the lawn?" for her to accept at once.

She tells herself, "Poor fellow! Perhaps a helping hand might save him—*mine*! Perhaps he is maligned—so many are. As to his being a Buddhist, I suspect it is half a joke. Besides, he

is so young and so handsome ! Above all, he is so evidently taken with me ! ”

At any rate, poor Marion is horribly frightened at his riding a steeplechase, and has picked up the intelligence that Auriole is rather a brute to ride, and has smashed a few bones now and then—not of his own, but his riders. She now innocently thinks she may dissuade her true knight, even at the eleventh hour, from tempting Fate by his foolhardy venture.

He stands talking to her at the side of the carriage in which she is seated, and as he leans his elbow on the door, replies rather lazily to her warning,—

“ It’s right enough. I often ride much worse screws than he is. One has to, if you want the practice.”

The white and blue jacket, in which he is to figure, shows beneath his great coat, and the cap of the same is—at least, so thinks Marion—singularly becoming to his dark, handsome face.

Marion’s brothers are all too loyal to blab the secrets of the smoking-room ; so she does not dream that nightly, since his stay at Studfield, it has been a cause of honest sorrow to Jack, Tom, and Harry, that their new young friend De Nares should have been so assiduous in his attentions to the brandy bottle.

True, it never made him intoxicated, but only more talkative, and, what he could hardly be called at other times, amusing.

The reason of this comparative sobriety was twofold. He is an old offender, and, moreover, is just now on his best behaviour—perhaps on Marion’s account ; for that he is as “ spooney ” upon her as he can be, is a fact which he makes not the smallest effort to conceal.

But if young men who ride steeplechases will drink o’ nights, there is no choice left them—they must

drink by day as well, in order to steady, for the moment, their shattered nerves.

Sweet innocent Marion, whose brothers, though with their full share of human weaknesses, never touch spirits, save when Mrs. Heatherly insists upon a hot grog of her own brewing being swallowed after a chill—real or imaginary—knows nothing of this sad habit of Augustus', beyond what may be conveyed by Lady Amaranth's vague assertion "that she heard he had every vice under the sun." And as she pleads with him now not to entrust his valuable neck to those terrible forelegs of Auriole, she is wondering what could have made him look so pale and haggard as they drove along, whereas he now displays a fine high colour.

Poor credulous little maid, she is probably weaving some tender small romance about sleepless nights and loving ardour, whereof she is the happy heroine.

She is at a loss to interpret the cold severe glance which Lord Warrington casts upon his heir-presumptive, as he happens at that moment to saunter by with Vaia Temple, whom he has just been showing round the course.

"Ah!" she says to herself, as the pair pass on, 'I fear poor Vaia has given her heart to a cold unfeeling man. He has no love for his own brother.'

And so the world is judged by even the best and purest.

And Hector says to his companion: "I hope your friend is not taking a fancy to my precious brother."

Vaia, instead of replying directly to the remark, which startles her as being more of an approach to the confidential than anything he has ever said before, only remarks,—

"Why do you speak that way of Mr. de Nares, your brother? It is so unlike what I take to be the general bent of your character."

"I am very glad you think so," he said, with evident sincerity. "Well, in the first place, I was speaking to *you*. I felt sure you would only make a proper use of your knowledge. Secondly: I have no other way that I know of, of saving a sweet and excellent girl from what would be a deplorable mistake."

"I have heard—I suppose most people have—that your brother has been rather wild."

"Wild!" repeated Warrington, with a bitter smile. And then he sighed and hung down his head as he walked, looking very serious.

They had now got somewhat free of the crowd. Then he said, "I should not mind that——"

"Whatever it is, I should not like you to tell me anything against him. He is, at least, young."

"Ay, young enough — young enough to be better!"

"But why should he not reform—repent!"

He only shook his head.

Vaia was filled with the hopes which she knew were rife in Marion's breast, and, for the first time too, she thought she saw a spot upon her glorious sun. She said, in her calm sweet way, which was so womanly and so forcible, "All who believe in God must believe in repentance."

"Miss Temple!" said Lord Warrington, turning to her almost solemnly, "I am not denying religious, spiritual repentance, nor Divine pardon. Do not imagine it. I am, I trust, well aware also of the necessity—not to call it the obligation—of Christian forgiveness on our own parts, from the heart, alike for the most heinous crimes and the cruellest personal injuries; but, dear me, this is no place for such a discussion, and I declare we have missed the race—or as good. See, here they come!" and as he spoke the dozen competitors came rushing by, all close together, the varied hues

of their riders giving a vague idea of a rainbow in a hurry.

"Oh, never mind!" said Vaia; "I care little for racing, and besides, it is the next one I want to see. If you know how much more interest I take in our—in what you were saying——"

"Well then, granting so much, I fear that humanly speaking I have scarcely any faith at all, as far as the affairs of life are concerned, in either repentance or reformation."

"This is very dreadful," said Vaia; "and I hope you are wrong. I should so like to convert you to more charitable, more hopeful views! What has given you such gloomy ones, for you are not gloomy by nature?"

"Bitter experience. Oh, I began like you. I was zealous for the rehabilitation of the fallen, but now all my ideas have changed. I see that mankind are broadly to be divided into two classes—the right sort and the wrong. Will you believe—for I assure you I have given the problem my sincerest attention—that I have never once known a liar become truthful, an evil tongue charitable, a drunkard sober, a thief honest."

"Perhaps not; you have been unfortunate; for that such reforms do take place, I am confident."

"They may occasionally, but I doubt if they would withstand a really strong temptation. Even if you could bring me a genuine case or two of absolute reform, they would be but the exceptions which prove the rule. But I will go farther, and declare that even venial faults are seldom remediable. Did you ever know a slovenly person become neat—a heartless one acquire a heart? Did you ever even know a bore cease to be a bore?"

Vaia could not resist a laugh as she assented to the obvious and overwhelming truth of the last part of the assertion.

"Still," she said, "I am not going to give in. You want to keep the human and Divine sides of this most vital, most absorbing question apart in a way which seems to me not logical. I really beg your pardon—I——"

"Oh, pray don't mind. I delight in free discussion."

"Well, then, what are you going to do with freewill, grace, prayer, as a means of resisting temptation?"

"I own I fail to see how I can be called upon to consider the theological bearings of the question in engaging my servants or agents, or in selecting my friends. You speak of resisting temptation. I don't want people with temptations—not, I mean, of a certain kind."

"We all have some, and must while life lasts."

"I should not think you had many."

"Oh," said Vaia, with touching seriousness, "you don't know how bad I am."

"Really," rejoined Hector amused, "you must be a good deal puzzled, I should think, in selecting your sins. However, the servants and the friends I choose are people with no temptations in the several directions I most object to. Some of the men I play cards with can ill afford to lose; but they are not resisting a temptation to cheat me; they have no inclination to do so. It would be to them more bitter a thousand times than starvation. My man Baines, whom you see over there preparing the luncheon, is just the same. Do you suppose if I thought he was combating, however bravely, an inclination to steal my money or pawn some of the silver, that I would keep him an hour? Not I, believe me, any more than I would be bothered with a wife who stuck religiously to me, while dying to run off with somebody else—that is, of course, if I knew it."

“Oh, Miss Temple! Miss Temple!” screamed two small Master Heatherlys, as they raced towards her, and then dashed violently up against her in their dead-heat, nearly knocking her down. “Papa wants you up beside him on the box, and if you don’t make haste you will miss the canter; so come as fast as ever you can.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE "BIG EVENT."

FOURTEEN competitors, out of a total of seventeen coloured on the card, made their appearance in the preliminary canter, or rather parade; for the ground being somewhat hard for steeplechasing, one or two of the "groggy" ones, as Lady Bagley called the infirm members of the veteran division, were ridden on the principle of saving their poor trembling forelegs as far as possible.

Of these was Auriole, who seemed, indeed, to have invented for himself a new way of sparing the two foremost members of his sleek and sinewy frame by walking about on his hind legs in an almost uninterrupted course of rearing.

But you could see at a glance that whatever he did was pretty much a matter of indifference to his young but skilful jockey.

Natural aptitude and great, if rather desultory, practice had made Augustus de Nares a formidable man to ride against in any field, and if his innate recklessness lost him a few races, it was at the same time the secret of that undeniable dash which, on so many occasions, led him to victory, and which many of his rivals in the pig-skin could never, with all their patient effort, and with perhaps more of true calm courage than he possessed, succeed in matching.

"Do you not feel proud of your brother, Lord Warrington?" asked the eldest Miss Heatherly, thinking to say a pleasant thing, and quite unaware of any coolness between the two.

"Not here," replied Hector. "I think all jockeys should be professionals — save only in garrison stakes—but I own I feel a pride in his being so cool a man as he is across country;" and he mentally added, "and I wish he was a tenth part as good a man anywhere else."

One of the last to emerge from the enclosure was Velveteen, the young and lovely miniature mare who carried "Captain Nat"; immediately followed—as though on purpose to court contrast—by the massive top-weight, The General, ridden by the renowned professional, old Job Mathews, who has hard work now-a-days to scale under twelve stone.

He it was who made the most flattering speech—at least, so thought its object—with regard to little Jones, which he had ever received throughout his racing career; on being asked why he could not afford to give Jones seven pounds, Mathews declared,—

"The Cap'n was about the only gent he ever rode agin' as knowed where the winnin' post was."

And, barring a few notable exceptions, there was doubtless a good deal in his remark.

To-day Nat looks very grave, as if doubtful whether even the enormous difference of forty-four pounds, which his mount is in receipt of from The General, can "bring them together," as the saying is.

Perhaps he derives some comfort from the reflection that the latter, besides supporting the weighty Job, has the tremendous additional task of carrying himself; for Nat's experienced eye has told him at a glance that the great horse has been let off easily of late in respect to work, and that he has grown somewhat gross since last they met.

Certainly no reproach of the kind can apply to

Velveteen, who, as her rider pops her over a convenient hurdle, conveys the conviction to the spectator's mind that she is a compound of whalebone and indiarubber, enclosed in a close-fitting cover of yellow satin.

"Papa," asks one of the numerous little boys who call the Squire by that name, and who have swarmed up the side of the break to where the latter sits with Vaia, "what are rib-binders?"

"Well, shall I tell you, or show you?" says papa, with a sly twinkle in his eye, and a nudge of his elbow to Miss Temple.

"Oh, I'd like to be told first, anyhow," says the sharp youngster.

"And what put the word into your head?" asked Vaia, smiling.

"'Cos me and George were over there just before they cleared, and I heard Lord Northdown tell his jockey to 'give Deliberation a couple of rib-binders as he came to the water.' Was that something to make him drink?"

"Drink! You silly fellow, no. He means the water jump in the course yonder, and referred to persuading the animal to negotiate the water in another fashion."

Vaia declared it was too bad of his father to puzzle poor Georgy with a list of hard words when he was asked for information, but the Squire insisted it made boys sharp, and forced them to fish out things for themselves, so he told his offspring,—

"You keep a good look-out on Deliberation and his rider when they come to the water jump, and if you can't tell me after the race what rib-binders are, why, I shall be happy to show you."

Meanwhile, at a distance of about half a mile to the right, several false starts had been delaying

matters in a manner highly irritating to all concerned; but now a welcome shout rang through the air on all sides, immediately followed by a silence so sudden and profound as to be positively startling to the uninitiated.

Every neck is stretched, every glass focussed, and only a few seconds elapse before that peculiar hollow sound of the hoofs of galloping horses striking upon the turf begins in its *pianissimo*, rises in its *crescendo*, roars out its *fortissimo*, sinks in its *diminuendo*, and in exactly the same number of seconds which it took to reach its climax, dies away again *morendo* in the distance.

Nothing but a few insignificant made fences and a couple of flights of hurdles have as yet been flown over, as the competitors disappear for a few seconds, rounding a corner to the left, and to use a threadbare formula, a table-cloth would have almost covered them all.

The great water jump, which looks so much worse than it is, and the Irish wall, are to be dealt with the second time round, for the course, barely a mile and a half in circumference, has what is termed in railway parlance a double line, opposite to where all our friends are stationed near the winning post, and it will only be on the third time of the field—or what remains of it—coming by, that the judges' fiat will be given.

Presently the combatants reappear far away. How small they have grown all in a minute!

"Some one down at the wall," shouts a voice.

"Who is it?" ask several.

"All right—he's up again. Its yellow and black; but lor', he'll never catch 'em."

And a moment after—

"Traitor has refused the double, and bolted the wrong side of the flag," yells another voice.

And so, with comments alternately sad and joyful,

the race is watched by thousands. Now a jostle sends a thrill of terror through some fair breast; anon the intelligence of a most frightful smash-up brings an exultant smile to the stern countenances of certain spectators. Who hate the hapless rider, who owe him revenge, who have some occult interest in his demise? Nothing of the kind. Simply—who happen to have laid rather heavily against that particular horse.

A few moments more, and they are heard approaching again from the right, with so far unabated speed, but the pace has told.

The company grows silent. The total number has now dwindled from fourteen down to ten; and of these the leaders are fully two hundred yards from "black and yellow," who brings up the rear.

And where, oh where are the "Dandy Dicks" of less than a quarter of an hour ago?

Every one now, man as well as horse, is wonderfully splashed and muddy. The boy who steers Traitor has lost his cap, and another horseman has disappeared altogether, his riderless steed going on in the middle of the ruck, and taking the various obstacles with a business-like seriousness which is quite comical to behold.

But of course to our Studfield party the fate of the two real live jockeys staying in the house is the absorbing centre of attraction.

Nor as they approach preparatory to taking the high wall do either of them seem unworthy of the keen interest they inspire.

Taking, as he is bound to do, the fullest advantage of his light weight, and finding now that a mile and a half of the journey is over, that no one seems inclined to make the running for him, the gallant Jones has now taken a slight lead of the entire field, while De Nares, upon the swift but infirm Auriole, is second, scarcely a length

behind him; for the impetuous youth never rode a waiting race in his life, and owns it is not in him.

Quite fifty yards off, Mathews is patiently biding his time upon the gigantic grey—seeming to form together but one centaur-like monster, so completely is the master-hand a part of his horse.

Imperceptibly, Nat Jones has steadied Velveteen for her spring, and she seems to jump her own height almost in her stride.

Perhaps Augustus neglects this precaution; at any rate, Auriole seems to overjump himself, for he clears the wall and to spare, but as he lands on the other side, the damaged forelegs upon which he descends with such violence give way beneath the shock, and he rolls right over, his rider being sent flying some yards in front, where he lies without the smallest apparent effort to rise; in fact, to all seeming, a lifeless mass of blue and white.

Poor Marion could not restrain a piercing shriek, but so many women screamed at the same moment that it attracted no remark, and then she quietly fainted away in her mother's arms; but only for a few seconds, and when she recovered, every one was too intent upon ascertaining poor De Nares' fate to attach much importance to her momentary weakness.

As soon as the horses swept by, the nearest spectators rushed to where the injured man lay, and quietly raising him, some of their number bore him into the weighing-room.

His brother and Mr. Heatherly, of course, hurried across to the same spot, and by the time they reached it, two doctors—one of whom was well known to the Squire—were already in attendance, and pouring brandy down the patient's throat.

Presently he opened his eyes, and very quickly recovered consciousness. A hurried examination

showed that he had fractured the right collar-bone, besides receiving a very severe shaking.

Both doctors declared it would prove nothing serious, but that it was advisable to have him driven back at once to Studfield and put to bed. One of them would then proceed to set the broken bone.

Meanwhile the great steeplechase had come to a conclusion.

Only five of the champions went the entire course, and in the last half-mile the race resolved itself into a match between the Redoubt, the General, and little Velveteen.

Job did wonders at the end with his Colossus, who, under all his weight, answered right gamely to his rider's final appeal.

No doubt little Jones was not quite his equal in science when it came to so close a finish as this one proved; but though every foot of the desperate struggle was contested with a care and obstinacy, a pluck and resolution which those who witnessed it did not soon forget, yet, spite of all, pace and weight told their tale at last, and the beautiful Velveteen obtained the judges' award by a short head.

When the ladies learnt that the terrifying mishap which had befallen Augustus was not so very serious after all, the party began to return to the pleasures of the day with due attention.

Every one seemed particularly delighted that Mrs Heatherly had drawn Velveteen in the lottery—the champagne corks shot quite a volley on all sides, and an onslaught was forthwith made upon the succulent and ample luncheon which might almost have led you to believe that these good people had never eaten before.

Though very deep in some pigeon pie, Georgy found occasion to say, with his mouth full—

"Papa, I do know what rib-binders are now."

"Then you don't want me to show you?"

"Ha, ha! No, please, Papa."

"But bless me, George! Oh, I'm afraid this looks very bad indeed. Do you mean to say that when our poor friend De Nares was lying for dead on the field, you could watch what the other riders were doing at the brook?"

"Ha, ha!" went Georgy, turning very red, but trying to laugh it off.

"George!" said his father severely.

"Well, hadn't you told me to?"

The accident not having turned out very terrible, this speech was received with general laughter.

"Heatherly," said Warrington, "your sixth son, or thereabouts, is a born lawyer, and from this hour we may consider his vocation settled. He is a special pleader ready made."

And so Georgy got out of it, and two minutes after was quite happy pinching Peachie with one hand that she might not enjoy her aspic, while he continued to regale his own appetite with the other.

The remaining items on the card went off with comparative flatness, except the farmer's stakes, which caused much merriment from the contrast the competitors—and chiefly the human ones—presented to those in the great race, and likewise by the number of quite harmless mishaps by which it was attended.

The Count continued to organize divers pools, American and others, lotteries and *paris-mutuels*, throughout the afternoon, and everybody patronized them "as though increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on."

So that when the signal was at length given for the horses to be put to, no one had begun to feel in the least degree weary.

The seldom failing diversion of one out of the six hired postillions being too drunk to ride, and his place having to be taken by a Studfield groom not dressed for the occasion, duly contributed its accustomed quota to the common hilarity, especially among the children; so home was reached at last by the numerous *cortège*, of which not a single individual could honestly say he had been bored.

And how has the gloomy and excitable Clarence fared throughout that sunny day? We fear that with one solitary exception he has been utterly forgotten by all his friends, even as by ourselves.

Whether this was by any means a safe course for some at least of the party will ere long be discovered. Beware how you ignore a dark and brooding spirit, say we.

The one exception was of course Lady Amaranth. She was one of those women, happily rare in this respect, who might be called an aunt first, a mother afterwards. It always follows in such cases that the auntship is to a man. Probably if Vaia and her cousin could have exchanged sexes, their places in Lady Amaranth's affection would have followed the natural order.

And still from hour to hour she kept this darling nephew in the dark as to her momentous interview with Vaia. With a weakness anything but characteristic of her, Lady Amaranth deferred the fatal moment which honesty and her very love for Clarence bade her hasten.

The plain truth is, she was afraid—afraid of it being too severe a shock for Clarence, weak as she well knew him to be, alike in mind and body.

Alas! are there not blows which gather more deadly force the longer our hand, with mistaken pity, would fain withhold them?

CHAPTER XV

A WET DAY.

THE second and last day of the Draycliffe Spring Meeting was one of almost tropical rain, so that only three or four men, and not one of the ladies, accompanied Mr. Nathaniel Jones—who was to figure again in two of the chases—to the drenched and dreary course.

It is doubtful if even in fine weather any of the softer sex would have been tempted to attend, with Lord Northdown's ball in view for the evening. It was to be a really grand affair, and most of the nymphs of that country-side felt that they were only doing justice to the fête and their own complexions in going thither fresh in face as in attire.

They had, it is true, some little trouble in bringing Lady Bagley round to their views. To her a racecourse, even when soaked, was still a kind of damp paradise.

A ball she looked upon principally as a place where there was no money to be won, and considering that Constance could never be induced to make the slightest effort at a flirtation, she could not see the use in going. Her ladyship had made sundry ineffectual efforts to get the foreign adjunct of a card-room introduced at English balls, but in vain—and she was apt to ask piteously,—

“What is a woman like me, who does not dance, who abhors gossip, and who does not even sup, to do for four mortal hours? And to think that when abroad I have only to place my daughter under

the sheltering wing of some willing friend, to be as happy as a lark—an intellectual lark, I mean—the whole night long!”

It was really quite pathetic. The worst of it was, though, that this craving on her part was quite insatiable. If you had given her whist all night, she would have wanted to play all the following day.

In London she had two regular whist afternoons a week, from three to seven, and one evening from ten till—well, there was no fixed limit. These were at her own house in Chester Square, and there was scarcely an afternoon or evening, when there was any one in town, but she was due at the abode of one or the other of her *clique*, male or female, where the like mania was indulged in.

These silent orgies—for do we not know that *L'whiste en Anglais veut dire silence*—are regarded by the outside world as might be so many *rendez-vous* for opium-eating, or any other kind of fool's paradise.

It was only when some imperative social duty intervened, or when Constance, of whom she was really fond, wished to see a play or be taken to some ball or party, that this “lady in waiting to the Queen of Spades,” as the Squire irreverently called her even to her face, could be got to forego so much as an hour of her darling pastime.

She had tried with honest affection to make Constance a partner of her joys, but that superior young woman “couldn't see it,” as the slang phrase goes.

“Whatever you can find, mamma, dear, in those stupid games—a clever woman as you are—I cannot think,” she would exclaim time and again.

“My dear, no one who is not clever could possibly find much pleasure in them.”

“It seems such loss of time.”

“Happiness is a curious sort of loss of time.”

"I don't know that. How far better to read a book."

"My eyes no longer stand much reading. The day will come when yours won't, and then you will regret too late you cannot play."

"If I do, I shall learn."

"You think so! My poor child, you might as well tell a man of sixty, who had never tried, either to take to shooting or hunting."

To-day after breakfast Lady Bagley exclaims, as she stands at the streaming windows,—

"What a miserable day!"

"Like everything else," says Lord Warrington, "it all depends on how you look at it. I call it a splendid day now for the house."

A gleam of real unadulterated joy lights up the matron's face.

"What a treasure you are! Oh, I mean it, on my word!"

"Billiards before luncheon, *piquet* later on! You see, I know how to interpret your high compliment."

"You are a magician, for you can convert dulness into delight by a word."

"What, games all day!" exclaims Miss Bagley, who never can get accustomed to the idea. "How sick you will both get of it!"

"Well," says her mother quite seriously, "if we should grow tired of *piquet*—which I can't conceive, because we play the rubicon, you know—we can have double dummy."

And so they went off to the billiard room. As they began with a couple of scientific misses—after settling the momentous question of stakes and points—Lady Bagley said, just as she might have deplored some infirmity, corporeal or physical, in her offspring,—

"Poor dear girl, she will be far from enjoying so happy an old age as her mother! But tell me,

you who analyze and can give a reason for everything—what is it that really lends such charm, for people like ourselves, to all these contests of mingled chance and skill?”

“They take us out of ourselves,” was the reply of the ever-ready Hector, who had, however, long since settled the question for himself. “You see,” he went on, making the while a whole series of running canons, “it is the moderate stake which governs the whole question. Do away with it altogether, and we should find our pleasure had flown; increase it unduly, and we should become gamblers, our love of the game diverted to the mere stake, and an undue anxiety constantly bringing us back most undesirably to ourselves from the fear of losses which all prudence would forbid.”

“I suppose that is it,” said his adversary.

“That is the case as far as I have been able to make it out,” concluded Hector. “Depend upon it we lovers of games are not quite so benighted as the rest of the world would make out; for just as there is nothing more deleterious to the health than gambling, so I aver that few things are to compare for wholesomeness with moderate intellectual play.”

While these two “birds of a feather” were thus passing a morning after their own hearts, Lady Amaranth had at last summoned resolution to fulfil her painful task of informing Clarence Hood of the hopelessness of his suit.

To tell any man so wrapped up in a woman as was this unfortunate youth, that the last faint chance has broken down, and that he must now face his despair as best he may, must always be a bitter trial to any one possessed of a heart; but in this instance Lady Amaranth’s ordeal was aggravated tenfold by her great affection for her nephew, and her fear as to how his brain might stand the blow. “*On ne badine pas avec l’amour*”; and if we are

constantly forgetting that great truth, it is because the world around us, while ever misapplying the sacred word love to any spurious imitation which wears its mask, yet contains such a ridiculously minute supply of the genuine article.

Lady Amaranth then took every precaution which tenderness and solicitude could invent, both to prepare poor Clarence for the news, and to break it to him in the gentlest possible manner.

"Promise me, dearest boy," she said, "that you will be brave; you are proud, and I love you for it, for it is with the right kind of pride. Remember, then, that a brave man is compelled by his very self-respect to do two things on hearing even the cruelest tidings—to bear them with fortitude as far as he himself is concerned; and with regard to others, to avoid all unseemly display, all rash and undignified action, all violent or thoughtless speech."

"What is it—what is it, aunt, you have to tell me?" he asked, apparently but little heedful of her well-meant exordium.

"The worst!"

"When—when did she tell you?"

This was an unexpected question, and sorely disconcerted her ladyship.

"Dear Clarence, what does the moment signify?"

"It was this morning, was it not? It must have been."

As she did not answer, he repeated the question. Oh, how sorry she was now that she had not told him at once!

Then she said truly when her interview with Vaia had taken place.

"Three days! and you have left me all this time in ignorance? Did you then care so little? You are cruel."

"Nay, you mistake me. I care too much. I feared to tell you."

He made a gesture, and looked for a moment as if about to utter some loud exclamation.

Then suddenly checking himself, he said—

"Please tell me exactly what she said, and *all*."

"It was very little—I mean a very few words. She said she could never—never be yours."

There was a silence of some seconds, during which Clarence sat staring at the floor, as if he saw wondrous things depicted there; his whole face was working, his hands were clenched. Presently he asked,—

"What did she say about him?"

"About whom?"

"Why, Warrington."

"Not a word."

"She did not?"

"No."

"Why did you not ask her?"

"I would not condescend. I am her mother; I would not stoop to suppose that a daughter of mine could think of another man within a few days of giving her word to you."

"And do you think she cares for him—I mean beyond the mere pleasure of talking to him?"

"If I must speak the truth, I fear so. But you are free to ask her either that or any question you please, and you have the right."

"He had better take care."

"Clarence, be calm! Of what?"

"Of my revenge," he said, starting up.

"But, dearest boy, do hear me. I believe Warrington has no thought of her, and what is more, I feel convinced he will never marry. Promise me at least one thing, that you will seek no explanation from him until you have had it out with Vaia."

"When shall I see her?"

"I meant to have advised you not to speak to

her on the subject at all, but now I have changed my mind. It is the one thing that may disenchant you, and so, the sooner the better."

Lady Amaranth was still so angry with Vaia for having frustrated all her long-cherished plans, that she never stopped to think how utterly unfitted to enjoy her ball that night the poor girl would too probably be, by so painful a scene as the one she was now hurrying on.

"Go," she said, "and find her; an easy task, for she cannot have left the house. If there is any place downstairs—the ball-room, for instance—where you can speak in private, well and good; if not, say I wish her to come up here, and when she has done so, I will leave you together. Remember, I rely on your preserving your self-control."

"Yes, yes," he said, about to hurry upon her errand.

But Lady Amaranth was not satisfied; she rose, and placing her hand upon his arm, arrested his attention more forcibly.

"Clarence, I do not doubt you, but do you fully realize what I say?"

"I am to look for Vaia——"

"That is not what I mean. I can only allow this explanation on your assuring me I may trust you—on your promise to keep your self-command. Mind, there must be no absurd threats against any one—no loudness, no violent reproaches. Clarence, have I your word?"

He paused. He evidently understood her now, and was taking a new view of what was to happen. His aunt, so accustomed to read him, could tell by the rapid changes passing over his face, how necessary her last precaution had been.

For a moment or two he hesitated, and she thought he was about to say that, thus hampered, he would have no interview with his cousin at all.

Then he fixed his eyes on hers, and with an ambiguous smile, said—"I promise that for the next hour, at least, I will be meek as a lamb."

And then she let him go.

He found Vaia watching the billiard players. After the first game, Lady Bagley had caught the sound of her voice trilling away—although, as has been already said, Miss Temple was no singer—in sheer light-heartedness as she crossed the hall, and had called her in and begged hard that she would mark the game for them, to which she had agreed with a willingness which will astonish nobody.

"I am sorry to spoil sport," Clarence said, on coming in, which he did without "waiting for the stroke," as the billiard phrase has it; albeit the door contained the requisite small insertion of glass. Then to Vaia—

"My aunt bade me request you to come to her boudoir."

"I will mark the game till you return," said Warrington; "that is, of course, if you favour us so far."

"Oh, *do* come back, dear," said Lady Bagley, who always played better before even only one spectator.

Once outside the room, Clarence said—

"Of course I could not explain before them—but——"

"*Did* not mamma send for me?" asked the girl, with some asperity, and stopping dead short in her progress.

"Yes, yes; but she only wants you upstairs to leave you there with me. It is her wish that we should have an explanation, and now. We were only to go to her if the ball-room was not empty—and see, it is so," he added, opening the door of that rather inconveniently large privacy.

Vaia seemed to hesitate a moment; then she said—

"Then we will not trouble. Yes—come in; I am ready."

CHAPTER XVI.

BEFORE THE BALL.

Vaia advanced at once to a rout seat near the window, right at the far end of the room, and sat down. She felt that whatever was to be said, the neighbourhood of doors was best avoided.

Hood came and leant against the grand piano near her, but showed no inclination to sit.

"Vaia," he began, "I suppose I give you no news when I say that calmness and self-control are hardly in my line ; but it may add to your comfort on the present occasion if I tell you that I have just given my word to your mother to be quiet as a mouse and as reasonable as a sage while our talk lasts."

"That is a comfort, certainly," returned Vaia, with a sigh of relief. "My dear Clarence, I should not be angry however much you stormed and raved at me. I think your case a very hard one. I do not allude to the loss of me as myself, but as you are good enough to suppose me to be."

"Thanks. It was natural—if that was to be—if I am to lose you, that I should wish to hear it from your own lips."

"Certainly. I know I promised to be yours, and that I shall never keep that promise. Many will say—you and my mother among the number—that nothing can justify such a course—that your consent alone could set me free. I think differently. My conscience tells me there is one other thing."

"And that is——?"

"My certainty that it would be doing a still greater wrong—to you, to myself, in every way—were I to marry you."

"And what has changed you?"

Vaia did not answer this plain question for a moment. She gazed out of the window, and seemed to be seeking inspiration from the rain.

After a little while she said, but without turning her head,—

"I told you, cousin, that I was not in love with you, but would wed you if you rashly desired it, having no warmer feeling than esteem—no stronger motive than to please my mother."

"I remember—I was willing to put up with that—I am so now."

"Well, time and reflection have shown me I was very wrong."

"A very short time—reflection indulged in upon a racecourse!"

"Taunt me if you will—I have deserved it."

She said this with a dignity which would have struck him more had he been less engrossed by his sufferings, and what he deemed his wrongs. He only said,—

"Well? I interrupted you."

"I was saying that I see clearly now it would be nothing short of a sin in me—mind I do not speak for others—to marry a man—any man whatever,—it is nothing personal to you—whom I could not love truly and devotedly."

The retort which this provoked made her start up as if she had been stung; for Hood had the temerity to ask,—

"And pray have you found such a man?"

With indignation flashing from her eyes, she said,—

"How dare you?"

"I think I am within my rights in putting the question."

“What do you mean?”

“It is surely clear enough. Do you love another?”

When, prompted by some o’ermastering motive, we succeed in becoming, for the time being, the very opposite of our usual selves, it is marvellous to what a degree we may carry our success.

Clarence’s calmness throughout this trying ordeal was little short of stupendous. It brought with it an amount of force alike of thought, word, and aspect, which fairly astounded Vaia. It struck her all of a sudden that he was right,—that this question was not the piece of impertinence her retort had implied; and that in fact he had, under all the circumstances of the case, a right to ask it. She dropped her defiant, offended manner, and speaking as quietly as he had done, said,—

“Forgive me; I was hasty. Yes, I admit your right to question me. Well, I love no one.”

She spoke like one telling the truth. He looked right into her eyes with his own. She met the glance without blinking. It was the natural desperation of a woman defending her secret, which lent her this power to feign.

It was a lie, no doubt, but we fear one which many a fairly good woman would have told in her place.

If all lies are odious, they, like everything else, have their degrees of impiety. This might almost be called an honest lie. It must be remembered—and this was Vaia’s excuse to her conscience—that Lord Warrington had hitherto breathed to her no word of love—shown her no more attention than honourable men are expected to pay to any charming girl with whom they chance to be thrown. The circumstance warranted this denial, being, as she told herself, more a *suppressio veri*, as casuists term it, than a statement of what was false.

We believe that some theologians hold that no false answer to a question can compare in guilt to a gratuitous statement of what is untrue.

Be that as it may, denial seemed to Vaia at the moment to be her only plank of safety. To own, even to Hood, that she loved a man who had given no sign that he shared the feeling, was to humiliate herself to the very dust, while any evasive answer would be equally ruinous, for he would at once jump to the conclusion, not only that she loved a man, but which man.

To her partial mind a mistake upon such a question was absurd in any company which comprised Lord Warrington—so incomparably did he tower above every rival in mind, in charm of manner, and the rest.

"Vaia, you are a Christian and a lady," Clarence said, not attempting to conceal his surprise. "This is the truth, is it not?"

"It is the truth."

"And this is your last word; you are quite absolutely certain, that nothing—no consideration, no lapse of time, will ever induce you to be mine?"

"Quite. But, cousin, I want to say I do feel for your suffering, and oh! I will always lavish upon you the affection of a sister. I want, too, to tell you how grateful I am to you for sparing me as you are doing. I—I cannot half express what I want to say—but——"

"Thanks," he said coldly. "It is I, I fear, who must seem ungrateful for such pretty speeches. Be that as it may, you will feel that this is hardly a moment when I can be expected to do them all the justice they deserve. Besides, do not be in a hurry; do not thank me too soon. A man must keep his word, but mine to my aunt only binds me for an hour. I think we have no more to say; they will be waiting for you in the billiard room."

But when he had walked a few paces towards the door, he turned and added,—

“No doubt you hope this is the last of the business. Most natural you should wish me to rejoin my friends in France for—well, no matter how long. It would be best so for you; but it is perhaps fairer that I should warn you you may be disappointed in that wish—and in other ways.”

And he sought the solitude of his own room.

Then after awhile, with the *clairvoyance* of love, the truth came to him.

He had been lied to, hoodwinked, fooled! Now what should he do?

The hour was nearly passed during which his promise bound him to good behaviour. Were he then to take the most extravagant course with regard to Vaia or Lord Warrington, he would no longer be breaking his word. “Others might lie, might perjure themselves, but not Clarence Hood. He and his line were all *sans peur et sans reproche*.”

And then came the thought,—

“Was it, after all, worth while to do anything? Were this wretched deception of a girl and her mere society prig of an admirer worthy of being honoured by his resentment in any shape? Surely contempt was the most dignified resource, and more likely than anything else would be to humble and sting the offenders.

His reason, or what he had left of it, approved; but scarce had that cool mistress spoken, when passion started up and cried out that to do nothing meant bearing the unbearable.

What then? Should he steer a middle course, and simply take his own life? Oh, how sweet and peaceful seemed the grave! He had always nourished doubts as to the guilt of suicide, and combated the opinion that most of those who commit it are necessarily of unsound mind.

Would Vaia care? He did not believe it, and that robbed the act of half its motive. We none of us like the idea of being ignored, even after death.

Then he thought of Lady Amaranth. Ah! she would indeed care, and only too deeply; and he did not want to cause her any sorrow.

There is at least that peculiar feature about suicide, that it is always time enough to commit it later on.

Two o'clock struck. He was free! But amid all the wildness of his fevered brain, he was not insensible to the unwonted superiority with which enforced calm and quietude had for the time endowed him.

"A good thing to remember," he tells himself, laughing almost audibly. "I'll go on being self-contained and cunning. Yes, cunning! I will not deceive, except by hiding every feeling within me from all eyes. The Italians say that he who goes quietly goes soundly, and he who goes soundly goes far."

He walked up to the dressing-table, holding the upper part of his head in both hands. It felt hot—hot and queer. Was he very miserable? Ah! perhaps. No, no; he would not be that! What had he done to deserve it? No; miserable? Not he. Let liars and deceivers be miserable! And he indulged in an exultant laugh, looking straight into the glass. Then another, and another, and——

A knock at the door.

It is a footman, who brings him word every one has gone into luncheon.

"Luncheon!" thinks Clarence. "Let us see, that is eating." Then aloud,—

"My excuses to Mrs. Heatherly, and I will not come down. I—I have a slight headache."

"Very well, sir."

Left alone, he threw himself on his bed.

"Yes, strange that people should want to eat so often! That must come from having nothing else to think about, or perhaps from too much happiness—joy at being with those they love and are loved by."

He could not eat for the world—not then; yet he had scarcely touched his breakfast. Better lie and rest on his bed. A bed!—yes, that's for sleep. He feels as though he had quarrelled with sleep; for days and nights he has slept so little. He cannot imagine ever being sleepy any more. Yet he is well, quite well. Oh, people sleep far too much—another result of their absurd happiness! He hates their happiness; it is so silly, hollow, false!

A fine clear young voice carols forth from a not distant room,—

*"L'amour est enfant de Bohème;
Jamais, jamais il n'a connu de loi."*

"Ah! by the bye," says Hood, sitting up to listen, "that's poor De Nares; and I've never been to ask him how he does. I'll go now. I wonder if he knows whether his brother cares for her! I may find something out."

It was a relief for him to be doing—no matter what.

He found the injured man, all bandaged and stiff, sitting bolt upright in bed, with half a dozen pillows behind him, and, on being asked how he was getting on, De Nares said,—

"Well, I'm bored, of course—bored to death."

"No worse than that?"

"Well, how much worse would you have? I'm pretty well used to it, to be sure. There's that comfort about it, that the more bones you break, the less you care about 'em. I've smashed nearly every one in my body, and my skull twice."

"Well, I suppose you like it, or you wouldn't go on," said Hood laughing. This diversion from his own brooding was already doing him good.

"Like it! Don't talk such rubbish, my good fellow! I hate the whole thing—the peril, the row it makes, the being picked up and fussed over,—the loss of the race—often of my money—and the whole blooming concern down to paying the doctor; but as no one has yet invented a way of riding over a country without occasionally coming to grief, and as I wouldn't give two cents for existence without it, I see no remedy but to grin and bear it."

"Your brother is very unlike you in that."

"Yes; gave it all up seven or eight years ago."

"And why?"

"Afraid of his neck."

"Funks—eh?"

"I don't believe it's that. He's too much afraid of making your humble servant a peer of the realm—at least, that's what I tell him."

"And what does he say?"

"That if that's my opinion, he won't contradict me. Oh, you might as well try to find a woman without an answer as my noble brother."

"Not much love lost between you, I should say."

"Love! Catch Hector loving anybody but himself! I think—though, by the bye, I ought not to say it to you——"

"To say what, and why should you not?"

"Well, you're her cousin."

"Oh, pray don't mind me! I'm a dead wall, and by no means touchy."

"Well, I was only going to say, if ever I saw a girl spooney in my life, Miss Temple is a gone coon about Hector."

"You think so?" said Hood, strolling to the window to conceal his intense interest, but throwing what indifference he could into his voice.

"Think! Why, my good chap, if you take the least interest in either of them, you must be blind not to see it; and you know I'm no admirer of any lords. But then, you're her cousin; and of course cousins and brothers have no eyes for their female folk, and I daresay you have some little game of your own on as well. *I* have. Say, it isn't one of the girls of the house, is it?"

"N-no," replied Hood absently. Then he said,—

"But as you say Warrington does not care for anybody, how is it likely she should care for him?"

"Likely or not, it's the fact. Besides, I said so to Marion, and she turned all colours at once."

"Marion?"

"Marion Heatherly. I call her Marion because we are spoons. She knows, of course, because she and the Temple girl are chums—awful pals, you know,—and when that's the case, girls always tell each other everything."

Disgusted as Clarence's refinement was at the other's coarseness, he stifled the feeling, and sought for more details of what was nevertheless so bitter to him.

"And what did Miss Marion Heatherly reply to your insinuation?"

"Lord, it was no insinuation! Ha! ha! Fancy this child insinuating! My eye! No; I blurt everything right out—I do! Ha! ha! Say—I always say 'say,' you know; learnt it at 'Frisco.' If I wasn't so darned gone on Marion, I should have had a go at the other myself. D——d fine girl, you know, and quite my style."

This was a little too much even for a man with a motive. However, at that moment Mrs. Heatherly, Warrington, and some others came to pay the invalid a visit, and to strive at relieving the tedium of a sick room, to the best of their power.

CHAPTER XVII.

AT NORTHDOWN TOWERS.

THE rain, which had continued to pour since early dawn, suddenly ceased at about four in the afternoon. The sky brightened, and most of the inmates took advantage of the change to escape from the confinement of the house, the extensive grand walks in the vicinity of which displayed quite a duck's back capacity for drying themselves in no time.

Lady Amaranth had naturally been very anxious as to how her favourite had borne the scene with Vaia, although she would not condescend to say a word to her daughter upon the subject; and Clarence's non-appearance at luncheon, followed by his wan feverish aspect, when, an hour or two later, she found him poring over some portfolios in the library, with black circles round his eyes, which looked sunken and hollow, albeit preternaturally bright—all this had worked her up to a state of considerable alarm.

"Are you sure," she asked, "you are fit to come to the ball to-night?"

"Why not?" he answered, a little resentfully. "Is there anything strange about me?"

"No, no, dearest boy, but you look ill. You would not come to luncheon, and have been quite starving yourself of late. You know if people will not eat, they cannot expect to be strong."

"What should I do with myself here if I did not go?"

"Oh, come, by all means, if you feel equal to it.

I only feared you did not. I thought you might prefer going to bed early."

"Bed! no, I am sick of bed."

"Clarence, would it be any comfort or relief to you to tell me about what passed between you and Vaia? I am not curious, believe me—only anxious for your sake."

"I know, I know, aunt." Here he put his hand to his brow as one who has a headache. "No, I would rather not. I have been over it all so often—too often."

Suddenly he brightened up, possibly affected by a sunbeam, the first that day, which just then cast its gladness without and within.

"Aunt," he said, "I have such a grand plan, ha, ha!" and then he stopped.

"A grand plan! Tell it me, dear."

"To forget them all. Would it not be famous?" Then, in a whisper—"Forget them, and start all over again. If only I *could*! If only I *could*!"

It was well that even in his abstracted state he was not looking at Lady Amaranth, over whose face there came a deadly pallor, or the sight must have made him worse than he was.

Recovering herself with a great effort, she said as lightly as she could—"Yes, yes; that will be best. Forget all and begin again. Come, we will have a walk—it will give you an appetite; for, mind this, unless you make quite a schoolboy's tea, and a dinner to match, you don't go to Northdown to-night!"

The recipe seemed to succeed. The fresh air, the prattle of some of the children whom they met, the sunshine, and the flowers, appeared to restore poor Hood, in some measure, to his normal state.

He really did succeed in eating some dinner later on, and accordingly Lady Amaranth, although depressed by a vague fear, a suspicion, that she

was not acting wisely, could find no tangible reason for putting her veto on his accompanying her and all the rest to the ball.

The Marquis' fêtes were celebrated. None could be more delightful, more sumptuously given; and then, their rarity contributed still more to enhance them in general estimation.

His lordship was a bachelor, but he generally contrived, on these occasions, to secure the aid of one or other of his female relations to help him to do the honours of his country palace—for Northdown Towers was no less—and to-night it was his eldest sister—a widowed duchess—who had undertaken the grateful office. Her Grace had a lovely daughter, who made her *début* this evening, shedding additional prestige on the gathering.

It was but a four-mile drive from Studfield, so that the Heatherly house party had a great advantage over many of the revellers who had driven a dozen, fourteen, ay, and in some instances, sixteen miles to the bright scene of action; and what was worse, they would have to drive back the same weary distance when quite tired out with their saltatory and other exertions at—say four or five o'clock the following morning.

However, nobody was going to dim the lustre and gladness of the present joyous hours by troubling their minds about consequences of any kind.

If there be a time when wise forgetfulness is commendable, nay, *de rigueur* for duly celebrating the occasion, both for our own sakes as well as our neighbours, it is surely at a fête of this kind.

The ball is at its height.

Now should each cavalier breathe into his lady's ear, as he encircles her pliant waist with an appreciative arm, and leads her forth to the innocent intoxication of the mazy waltz—

“Floating in ethereal realms of Fancy’s fairy sway,
Soaring unto light with thee from earthly gloom away.
Beloved, would I fain beguile the lingering sands of
Time,
And revel for ever in oblivion sublime!”

Oh, if only such dreams as are destined to be realized were to be indulged in by young hearts at moments like to these, when every sense poor human nature possesses is simultaneously ministered to by spirits of sound, of taste, of smell and of touch, invisible as well as visible, then, indeed, might it be as well to do away with all pageants of the kind.

But while humanity has youth, and youth illusions, so long will it prove sweet to young people to meet and dance; so long will the best among their elders love sometimes to come and watch them, not repining, but rejoicing in the happiness before their eyes, nor grow embittered at the remembrance that they too once were young, although those days have flown for ever.

The gaiety was at its height; half-past eleven had just struck from the great tower of the castellated pile, a waltz was over, the numerous couples had joined arms, some to take a turn round the room, some to quit it in search of refreshment, when, in an instant, all stopped short, rooted to the spot where they stood, every mouth suddenly dumb, every eye and ear astretch in amazement, curiosity, horror!

A man’s voice, raised in rudest anger, was daring to—

“Break the good meeting,
With most admired disorder.”

People doubted where they were. Surely in bed, victims to some ghastly nightmare. Had they been transported by an evil magician from the halls of a great noble into some low tavern? No; look around. There is the Duchess, there her lovely

daughter, and a little farther off stands Lady Amaranth Temple, paler, more terror-stricken than all the rest. No, it is but too unmercifully real, this blood-curdling interruption, this pitiless dragging back of every mind roaming away for a brief span amid

“Dreamlands, vales, and sunny heights,”

to the hardest reality of a sin-stained and suffering world.

Right in the centre of the room—the great ball-room—stood Clarence Hood, appearing, for the moment, fully a head and shoulders above his usual stature, and endowed with the strength of a very giant. His eyes were darting from their sockets. He had seized Lord Warrington by the collar of his coat with the left hand, while he gesticulated wildly with the clenched fist of his right, and appeared every instant as though he would use it to strike.

At the first onslaught, Warrington, engaged in conversation with the illustrious *débutante* with whom he had danced the waltz, had not even recognised his assailant, when, with the natural gesture of one who feels himself rudely seized by the collar, he jerked up his disengaged arm—the right—in order to free himself.

He might as well have rebelled against the grip of a tiger. Then no sooner had Hector caught sight of his aggressor, than something like the truth flashed like lightning through his brain, and he saw at once that the best hope of avoiding a deplorable *fracas* was to compel his mad opponent to fight—if fight he must—alone.

Meanwhile a torrent of words were being rained upon him from the mouth of the infuriated man, who had begun raving at him as he seized his coat—the words which had struck such horror into the heart of each guest.

"Villain!" roared Hood; "damned, cursed villain, you shall not escape me! You have wrecked my life! You have robbed me of the woman I love, and who was sworn to me! but I've got you now, and I'll have your life! Do you hear? Your heart's blood! You well know whom I mean—Vaia—Vaia Temple! Go! ask her! She tried to hide her love from me, but she will own it to you! Hell-hound, you've enthralled her! No, no, you shall not go! You would escape me! You shall die here, now—now—now! Oh, devil—devil—devil!"

And gathering all his tremendous maniac's strength for the effort, he aimed a blow at Hector's head which looked as though it might have felled an ox.

Meanwhile the peer had with his left arm gently, but firmly, put away from his side the fair girl who was unconsciously clinging to him in her efforts to draw him away from his assailant, and he stood ready to parry, to the best of his ability, the mad-man's threatened blow.

But even as young Hood's fist was drawn back to strike, his wrist was seized as in a grip of iron.

It was Squire Joe, who, with his two goodly arms—arms of a very blacksmith—had rushed to the rescue.

Finding himself suddenly balked of his head-long revenge, Hood glared at him furiously for a single second—a thousand livid lights darting from his eyes, and then he fell heavily to the ground in strong convulsions, foaming at the mouth, and howling in a manner most appalling to hear.

By Lord Northdown's direction and personal assistance, he was carried off and placed in the nearest spare bedroom, where the local doctor—always a favoured guest at the Towers—the poor young man's devoted aunt, and one or two more, hastened to render him all the help they could.

This awful climax was, however, far from being in reality so extraordinary as it appeared even to those who had some clue to the ill-starred Clarence's state of mind. It is probable that, under any circumstances, Vaia's behaviour towards him would sooner or later have disturbed the balance of an intellect always over-excitabile and predisposed, as it was by heredity, towards temporary manifestations of mania, if not to hopeless and permanent lunacy.

But so far as it was possible to judge, the immense probability would appear that the above pitiable outbreak would never have occurred but for a purely accidental circumstance.

Not feeling himself equal to dancing, for the moment at least—indeed, he had arrived at the ball with a splitting headache—he had thrown himself into a seat during the preceding dance, where he was partially shaded and hidden away by the spreading leaves of a palm-tree. That dance, also a waltz, Vaia had given to Lord Warrington. It was such a foregone conclusion that they would dance together at least once in the evening, that this in itself would not have caused him to break through his resolution to bear with calmness whatever the night should bring forth.

But his evil star happened to be in the ascendant, for Hector and his partner happened to stop for a short breathing space right against Hood's very knees. They did not look round, and evidently never dreamt of his vicinity. Pitching their naturally clear voices so as to be distinctly heard above the music—a full band—and the general hum, they spoke as follows:—

“Because,” said Warrington, “if I thought you cared the least about him——”

“Oh, but I don't, indeed,” she replied.

“I'm delighted to hear it, for now I can speak

out. I could never find it in my heart to run down anybody who was dear to you."

"That's very nice of you, Lord Warrington; but no, I can't say I could ever endure him although he is one of mamma's fads."

"It would interest me to hear why you are so averse to him; my own motive is easily to be understood if stated. I may tell you that some day. Meanwhile, do let me know yours."

"Simply, then, because I detest a ridiculous man, and our poor friend has——"

"Pray do not call him *my* poor friend."

"Well," concluded Vaia, "whatever he is, I always find it difficult not to burst out laughing in his face. Ha, ha, ha! Too bad, is it not? But he is such a bore—such a foolishly solemn bore. Ha, ha, ha! Will you be shocked if I say, let us go on?"

And away they whirled, little dreaming of the result their idle words would so swiftly produce.

"Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong as proofs of Holy
Writ."

Now it is superfluous to state that they were not alluding to Clarence at all. There were, at least, a hundred reasons why they could not possibly be doing so.

They were both too good-hearted, besides being far too well bred to do anything of the kind. Their talk was all of a certain society "water-fly," an odious specimen, as spiteful as he was absurd, but whose looks and position had floated him along for a certain time until he gradually got found out for what he was.

Warrington had especial cause to hate him, because the creature had once borrowed a couple of hundred from him, giving his word of honour to pay the sum

back within the week, instead of which he had never returned a single penny of it.

The wretch had got himself into Lady Amaranth's good graces by dint of flattery—a poison to which it is said so many of us are partial.

When madness is aboard the frail human vessel, the slightest crumb will make her lurch over and founder.

To Clarence's fevered ear—and be it recalled that he had scarcely eaten or slept for many days and nights—not so much as a doubt ever arose but that he was the subject of their contemptuous chat, the butt of their—to him—insolent ridicule.

When Hector hinted that it was no wonder that he should hate the fellow, and that he hoped one day to tell Vaia wherefore, the identity sounded to the ill-fated listener all too abundantly clear.

And “Ha, ha, ha!” that silvery, careless, galling laugh with which she had tripped off in a hurry to be in the arms of his rival—that laugh rang on and on in his ear. Go where he would, listen to what he would, he could hear no other sound, and it grew with each breath, with each instant, until at last the poor brain gave way.

Lord Northdown and his relations were placed in a most painful and awkward position between their divided duties to Lady Amaranth and the Heatherlys on one side, and their numerous guests on the other.

For a time the gay festival came to a dead stop, and many were the proposals to order round carriages and take a hasty leave.

People were soon made to feel, however, that obedience is the truest politeness.

The Duchess requested, and in a manner which made petition like to command, that all should wait quietly where they were.

Lady Amaranth, like the thorough *grande dame*

that she was, did not long allow her severe grief and alarm to impede the action of her mind. Having ascertained that by altering the position of the band, and closing the double doors which led to the room where her nephew lay — still, alas! wildly raving — its loudest strains could not be heard, she herself begged the Duchess, as a personal favour, to have the dancing resumed, and the programme of the evening carried out as though naught had befallen.

This, as regarded the great bulk of the company, was accordingly done.

Even the Studfield party, acting under strict orders for a time, did their best to follow the general lead. They were, however, allowed quietly to depart about one o'clock.

The doctor declared Clarence Hood to be suffering from well-defined brain fever; but assured Lady Amaranth that whatever danger there might be, life was not immediately threatened. His patient must on no account be removed. She accordingly left with the rest, having agreed, at the Marquis' request, to take up her post at Northdown Towers on the following day. Vaia was likewise invited, but her mother very rightly preferred to leave her under the wing of good Mrs. Heatherly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TRIFLES

"PAPPY," cries Peachie, bursting open the study door and standing there with a great drop in each long-lashed eye, like dew upon a rose, her childish breast evidently—

"With trivial sorrow deep convulsed."

"Why, Peachie!" says the Squire, looking up from his accounts — those terrible documents wherein the assets never can be made to cover the liabilities—dreadfully busy, yet delighted to be disturbed.

Then, at the top of her voice,—

"Mammy says Willie's to ride to the post-office, and Dale says Dobbin the Second is wrong, and he's going to take Frisky, and I don't want him to, 'cos I know he'll beat her."

Peachie spouts all this out at a breath, and with no punctuation, just succeeding in her valiant effort to reach the end without the interruption of one of her own deep sobs.

Meantime her father has shot far too regularly for the last thirty or forty years not to have somewhat dulled the normal acuteness of his ears.

He has hardly caught three words of the whole grievance.

"Come here, my darling," he says; "come and kiss her own papa."

Peachie quite thinks it must be very nice to kiss her, for everybody seems so fond of doing it. She

is also strongly of opinion that this dalliance will further her ends now.

Accordingly she obeys—a thing she is quite above doing, as a matter of course; for she is not the belle of the nursery for nothing—and having exchanged fond embraces, kneeling up on her father's knee, she begins again,—

“Mammy says Willie's to ride——” and goes over the whole statement in exactly the same tone as before, and with the same identical contempt for punctuation.

Poor Squire Joe has long since realized that he is only the nominal ruler in his own house.

When his women- and children-kind come to him about everything, and persistently treat him as the absolute and sole visible power in all conceivable matters, what man, who is a man, but must let them have their own way!

“Their own way!” Three beautiful words! They sound so simple. Say yes, and have done with it. You think so, madam, do you? Ah, it is easy to see that, even in some former existence, you never were the father of some large English family.

There is not only, to start with, the terrible difficulty of ascertaining, with anything resembling certainty, what that “own way” really is—for it is quite on the cards that he may be called roundly over the coals the very next day for having made what appeared to him a most noble sacrifice—there is the equally puzzling task of finding out how many “own ways” there are, how far they tally, and in case of divergence, whose “own way” it will on that particular occasion be safest for him to follow, with a view, that is, to the married man's constant though seldom attained *point de mire*—a quiet life.

In the present dilemma, things turned out upon investigation to be far more embarrassing than at

first, from the seemingly artless statement of Peachie, appeared to be the case.

Thus it soon transpired that the relations between that very young Machiavelli and her mother had grown what diplomatists term "decidedly strained" before the temporal power of "Pappy!" had been appealed to. Then both the English and French governesses were mixed up in the affair in some mysterious way, into which—with like experiences present to his mind—Squire Joe forebore to enter; but those learned women were, of course, on opposite sides.

There was a farther complication in the notorious *faiblesse* of "Mamselle" for Master William, only made respectable by absence of all concealment, and the noteworthy disparity in age—about forty-three years.

Still, large as this latter difference was, it was barely sufficient in the eyes of Miss Rite, the British incubus.

Soon Peachie, with her father in tow, appeared in the drawing-room.

The chief upshot of it all was an incredible waste of words, likewise of time. It ended as most rows, great or small, do end—in a compromise. Willie started upon the pony—he might have done the distance there and back on foot by that time—having given his word, and quite delighted to have it asked, that he would carry neither whip, stick, nor spur; but that if Frisky would not go on, he might urge her to that obvious duty by a moderate application of the spare end of the reins.

Peachie was comforted by her father making it a personal favour to himself that she should lend *him* the pony for Willie to ride.

She had met with one rebuff, however, in the course of negotiations, and from a quarter she little expected.

When things were at their worst in the drawing-room and feeling ran high, she had made an impulsive but injudicious appeal to Lord Warrington, thinking very likely that his rank—of which she heard so much from the governesses—might tell in the balance; besides, she looked upon him in the light of one of her slaves.

But Hector had not been during eight years a professional diplomatist to no purpose. Defying female blandishments even at the hand of Peachie, he stuck manfully to the *noli interficere* policy, a course which the infant divinity inwardly vowed that she would make him pay for.

When he was presently left alone with Mrs. Heatherly, that comely matron felt she must make him some little apology for the paltry fuss to which he had been a silent witness, adding—

“I am afraid it must have bored you to death, and that you could not read a line.”

“Well, as to reading,” he said, “I was only skimming the *Morning Post*; but I assure you I was both amused and interested. The study of humanity—civilized humanity, at least—is my favourite hobby, and a scene such as we have just witnessed has a special attraction, from the fact that we could see nothing like it in a theatre.”

“You relieve my mind. I really cannot bear our guests to be annoyed by the children. I do not like it myself when on a visit to other houses, and yet I know we never succeed in keeping our own in order. I am sure now you think we spoil them dreadfully.”

“I am happy to see that you do what stupid people miscall spoiling, to a very large extent.”

“What delightfully refreshing theories you have! Do you know, Lord Warrington, I often wonder whether you are not a very dangerous man.”

“Dangerous!” he repeated smiling, well under-

standing that his hostess was not alluding to fascination.

"But, however dangerous it may prove, let me hear what you have to say about indulgence as applied to young children. I am sure you have studied the matter profoundly, although you have as yet no small subjects of your own to experiment upon. That, however, I trust may soon be otherwise."

He paid no heed to the last part of her sentence, saying—"I cannot understand any one interested in man omitting the study of children."

"You seem to approve of what is called spoiling?"

"Broadly speaking, I do; but so much depends upon what object you have in view."

"How do you mean?"

"Do you want quantity, or quality?"

"What, in the children?"

"I am not alluding to numbers, but to excellence."

"I see—great excellence in a few, as against a respectable excellence in all."

"Yes; I do mean just that."

"The worst of it is," he continued, rising and pacing to and fro—a sad habit with Hector if he was thinking hard—"that as we can form so little idea of the characters of very young people, we must more or less plunge in the dark when dealing with them; in other words, risk something to gain more—gamble with them, in fact."

"I do not quite follow you."

"My father used to talk a great deal of a famous trainer called Scott—John Scott; also of a great singing master—I mean for Opera—named Garcia."

"I wonder what is coming!"

"The first broke down more horses, the other more voices, than any two men who ever lived."

"Then they were impostors!"

"Oh dear, no; they were the two most successful men of their day, although, by the bye, I don't suppose either ever heard of the other."

"But I thought you said——"

"So I did. Each was the worst possible man to take your only colt or your only pupil to, unless you happened to know they were made of iron, but the very best to take a great number to, because—and here is the whole gist of the matter—both systems were so severe that the few survivors were pretty sure to beat any competitor whom milder methods might bring against them; and sure enough Scott won more Derbys, and Garcia produced more Grisis, than any of their rivals."

"I think I see what you are coming to—but is not this 'the survival of the fittest,' with rather a vengeance?"

"No doubt. The fact is, that the brightest gems of humanity are those men and women who have defied the most desperate efforts made to spoil them!"

"If I thought that!"

"You may in all safety. If in a large family like yours there lurk an angel or two, and I think, without wishing to flatter, that Miss Marion is a case in point, depend upon it the only system for developing them to their highest perfection is to strive your very utmost to spoil them!"

"And what of the others?"

"Oh! there, I admit, you do some little harm; but it is unimportant to my thinking, compared to the awful risk of an angel *manqué*. Here, as everywhere else, *Malheur aux vaincus!*"

And then luncheon was announced; and the diminished company gazed sadly upon the shrunken proportions of the dining table.

There is much truth, no doubt, in what is said

about the charm and sociability of small parties ; but in a country house, let them be enjoyed before, not after, a large gathering. Many of the guests had left after breakfast, because it was the pre-arranged limit of their visit.

Count de Turgy was to have been among these, but had yielded to Mrs. Heatherly's earnest entreaties that he would be her true knight still, and stay on to combat with his sharp and brilliant lance the demon of melancholy which seemed bent upon invading their castle.

Then two of the number were away at the North-downs, and their very absence brought them terribly to the minds of their sad and sympathizing friends, with all the awful circumstances of the night.

To add to the general depression, young De Nares was to-day reported to be doing less well. The doctor talked of having another opinion down from London, owing to the unsuspected and unsatisfactory condition of the patient's blood.

But spite of all these causes to the contrary—and, indeed, of several more which have not yet been referred to—everybody felt bound to do their very best, if only for their hostess' sake, to relieve and not add to the general gloom ; and the main difficulty, as with the Count, for instance, was to be tolerably cheerful without becoming unduly gay. More than one might have, with truth, exclaimed—

"I am not merry, but I do beguile
The thing I am by seeming otherwise."

This polished company, however, acquitted themselves very creditably, all things considered. Mr. Jones had left that part of the country on the previous morning, to ride somewhere else.

Indeed, he would hardly have been in his element at the Northdown ball. The Bagleys were to start for town after luncheon ; and the dinner-party had

an ominous promise about it of shrinking to a dozen.

Lord Warrington, after anxiously asking himself what were best to be done, proposed that the Misses Temple and Heatherly, with, say the Count—for it would not look well to appear too large a cavalcade—should ride over to the Marquis', to make solicitous inquiries after poor Clarence Hood, and those who had been so upset on his account.

The suggestion was eagerly adopted by Vaia and De Turgy. Marion declared herself still too fatigued and generally unhinged to attempt horseback exercise; and very probably anxiety for the aggravated condition of the sick lover upstairs had somewhat to say to the matter.

Be that as it may, a less interesting though elder sister went in her place, and to the latter's agreeability did the gallant Frenchman do homage as they went and returned through lovely English lanes and grassy downs made to be cantered over.

For by common consent Warrington and Vaia rode side by side throughout the afternoon.

The events of the night before, though present to close their lips on certain themes, and even to banish the faintest gleam which might be taken for love-light from their eyes, were none the less powerful to make these two feel that matters between them were no longer as they had been, and that a brief future must now involve both explanations and results pregnant with a thrilling interest for each.

Meanwhile, how sweet it was on this spring day to be together!

CHAPTER XIX.

SOCIETY JOURNALS AND SOCIETY DOCTORS.

OWING to Lord Northdown's great influence, nothing which could cause annoyance to the friends or relations of either Hood or Lord Warrington appeared in the notices of the county papers about the ball. It was merely stated that the former had been taken seriously ill during the evening, and was still lying at the Towers in a precarious condition.

A statement of an equally guarded kind was despatched to the *Morning Post*, but notwithstanding these precautions, neither Lady Amaranth nor any others of the interested parties had the faintest hope that the society journals, as they are called, would forego so favourable an opportunity of amusing the many at the expense of the few.

Vaia's mother was, as we have seen, a woman with real, if not always well-regulated feelings. She was also one who never allowed herself to be engrossed by any single solicitude to the neglect of other important matters.

It was arranged among the equestrians that Warrington alone should go right up to the house, while the rest, including one of the grooms, awaited his return at a discreet distance, walking their horses about the park.

In sending up his card to Lady Amaranth, he told the servant to be sure and say he had no wish to disturb her, but would come in if she had any reason for desiring to see him.

The result was his being shown into an empty sitting-room, where his old friend very soon joined him.

"Well, how is the poor invalid?" he asked.

Her ladyship looked pale and worried. She replied,—

"There will be no change for some time. Of course there is great danger, but the doctor feels confident the poor boy will pull through."

"Does he suffer?"

"Not consciously—only as we may do in a nightmare. They have cut off his hair, and keep his head in ice. Sir Magnum will be here in an hour or so, and after he has seen him, we may know more."

She then unfolded her fears as to the society periodicals, adding,—

"Of course even you, who are a man of unexpected resources, can suggest nothing."

He pondered for a moment before replying.

"N—no," he said doubtfully; "I have thought much about it during the morning. I will do what I can. There are really only three that amount to anything. I know the editor of one—not at all a bad fellow; but if the other two are to have their version, it seems unfair to ask him to refrain from giving his, and as far as we are concerned, two are as bad as three."

"I suppose no amount of money would stop all their mouths?"

"Nothing will do that! They can be made to apologise for—to eat—often to pay damages for their words; but no, the power does not exist which can prevent their utterance."

"It is very maddening."

"An inevitable outcome of the age. The editor of a society paper looks upon fine, and even imprisonment, as so much useful advertisement. He no more likes these things on their own account than a soldier likes his wounds; but both impart their desired stamp nevertheless."

"But my dear Warrington, that is not the worst

part of the matter. I quite understand the elasticity of men's consciences when their bread is at stake; but it is a hundred times more appalling to feel that in a house like this, in such company as we had last night, we are not safe from members of our own class! Heavens! which of them do it, and above all, why?"

"My dear friend, that too is inevitable. The demand creates the supply."

"But everybody is not in want of a few shillings?"

"No; but in every society there are some who are. However, that is not all; you must make allowance for private spite—the sweetness of revenge, and so forth."

"The law should put it all down," exclaimed Lady Amaranth impulsively. "It should be made criminal to publish people's private affairs."

"Not in the age we live in. You might as well try to abolish all *viva voce* gossip and backbiting. No; believe me, the society papers are irritating, and that they do some harm I admit; but they are very far from being an unmitigated evil."

"I can see no solitary advantage in allowing them to go on."

"Advantage or no, there is but one way of suppressing them."

"You mean by our all agreeing never to buy them."

"Precisely; and you will not pretend such a contingency, or anything approaching it, can ever come to pass. My dear lady, the society papers exercise a certain dread, not without its restraining effect upon many unsatisfactory human beings. Then there is the salutary fear of being so publicly held up to ridicule. Altogether they form part of the great open-air existence of the only European country where liberty of the press—that glorious child of British growth—can breathe and flourish."

Then, explaining to his auditor that the others were waiting for him all this time in their saddles, he took his departure.

It will be observed that no reference, however slight, had been made by either of these two goodly personages to the particular words which, in his frenzy, Clarence Hood had hurled so publicly at the young peer.

It was not for Lady Amaranth to imply, however remotely,—

“I should like to know what your lordship intends to do. Have you had any voluntary part in depriving my daughter of her affianced husband, my beloved nephew of the bride I had selected to retrieve the fortunes of his house? And if so, what reparation—to the lady at least—do you now propose to offer? Whatever the real circumstances of the case, the world at large—nay, *our* own exclusive world—will hear and believe that you have been publicly charged with decoying the affections of my daughter from the man who so passionately loved her; and few will be disposed to credit that such an achievement upon your part can have been accomplished without some little design and effort of your own.”

All these thoughts had however by this time passed distinctly through her brain, crowned by the very practical one that the sooner Vaia and Lord Warrington were married, the better for all parties. It was perhaps strange that Lady Amaranth felt no bitterness against Hector, who, “willy nilly,” had been the cause, as she well knew, of Vaia’s change. No; it was against her daughter alone that all her ill-feeling was concentrated—the common hardness of woman against woman. She had, it is true, started in this little drama—begun less than a month ago—with a strong predilection in favour of Warrington; and it ever required a

great deal to alter her ladyship's personal likes and dislikes, especially where a man was concerned.

But Warrington read her like a book, and not a single thought passed through her brain on this subject with which, during their talk about certain weeklies, he did not credit her.

Whatever were his feelings or his views, decency for the moment placed a seal upon his lips as immovable as that on hers. There could be no possible doubt or hesitation upon the point. It was evident that the sick man must either die or recover before any action could be taken, any decisive word uttered. This the commonest delicacy must imperatively dictate.

And Vaia had been by, and heard every word of that fearful tirade; and whenever—now that the first horror and excitement of the moment had in some measure subsided—whenever the remembrance of her name, shouted out on that ghastly occasion, and the sense in which it had been used against Warrington, against the man she loved, by the maniac—each time that all this came back to her, it filled her whole being to the brim with shame, confusion, almost despair. For what if he did not love her!

She told herself that any amount of suspense would be preferable to such a certainty as that.

That he liked her company was evident—that he was even beginning to have some affection for her was, Vaia thought, not to be doubted; but she had already learnt enough about men to know that comparatively little of what she sighed to ascertain, depended upon either of these things, flattering as they might be in themselves, unless to these were superadded a third, or, to speak more correctly, unless they were founded upon a third. Did her beauty appeal to him in a way to threaten his peace? This, after all, is what every woman wants to know concerning the man whose hand she covets, because

she is well aware that by the answer to that question she must stand or fall.

And yet on her side, it was not Warrington's looks, good though they were, which had chiefly either won or now held her. Had some illness come and destroyed all these, she would have been sorry indeed; yet far more so for his sake than her own. There would even have been a balancing offset to her regret in the thought that his newly acquired ugliness would keep away and debar her hero from seeking other admirers; that she would henceforth have him more confidently all to herself.

But Vaia well knew that such views as these are not to be found in any man under the sun. She had never to her knowledge wilfully shown this one for a single instant that she loved him, and yet she tells herself to-day, as they ride home side by side, that he must most surely know it, and marvellous to relate, she is not ashamed to think so; quite the contrary—it is her one comfort and joy.

At dinner that day the conversation decidedly dragged, although graced by the

“ Wise saws and ancient instances ”

of no less a personage than Sir Magnum Bonum, Baronet and M.D., and half the alphabet besides in little groups of two, three, and four, after his name.

When Lord Warrington learnt from the local doctor that his brother's state was less satisfactory, he arranged with Mrs. Heatherly that Sir Magnum should be asked over to dine and sleep, after attending the other case at the Towers, whither he had been summoned by wire.

It was wonderful how many unkind things were habitually said and believed, many of them, too,

by his learned brethren of the craft, both as a physician and a man, concerning this most popular person. Sir Magnum was always alluding to this himself, and affecting to glory in it, declaring that popularity and abuse are always in exact proportion the one to the other.

"If I am ignorant or stupid, why don't my patients die?" he would ask triumphantly. "Luck may do much, but they cannot surely all be in a conspiracy to get well merely to add to my reputation, and fill my rivals with dismay."

In these days, when a doctor is nothing in any line unless he is a specialist, Bonum, with that quota of worldly wisdom which even his enemies allowed him to possess, determined to follow the fashion in this, as he did in his clothes, his equipages—self-conducted—and his delightfully aristocratic little dinner parties, and consecrated himself a specialist in gout—an undoubtedly safe selection.

He is very handsome, and, as every doctor should be, a walking advertisement as to the truthfulness of his own theories and treatment. You would like to consult him, even if he were not a doctor.

Sir Magnum still wants a comfortable little number of years before he shall strike sixty. He is tall, and, though just a little inclined to be portly, to put it mildly, he bears himself in so noble and upright a manner, that his slight *embonpoint* rather serves to add to his presence than to detract from it.

Of course his rivals have a cut-and-dry way of accounting for his many cures; but then, was there ever anything a rival was at a loss to account for? They say that he never himself attempts a decisive treatment of any kind, but deals largely in gossip, anecdote, flattery, and such like; is a charming and ornamental companion, who lets out his curative presence, chiefly to well-preserved dowagers, at two

guineas and upwards per quarter of an hour. But that so soon as he perceives there is serious illness—and although he never studies, he has a sort of knack of picking things up—he instantly has recourse to a consultation, and calls in to his assistance all the best talent of the faculty. “Quite right,” they declare, “in this”; but add, “only, by such a rule, every one may be a great doctor.” To which he answers,—

“Let them try!”

As he sits to-day at table, on the left of his amiable hostess, who happens to be one of the very few people of any consequence at all whom he has never met before, Sir Magnum looks decidedly ornamental, with his well-curved whiskers and becoming iron-grey locks; and if a captious critic will have it that he is pompous, no one can deny him his air of distinction, in spite of the long gold chain which falls from his neck, and the enormous diamond which sparkles upon the little finger of his left hand, threatening nearly to outshine even the magnificent Sir Magnum Bonum himself.

Still, notwithstanding his august presence, talk dragged, as it mostly will when half the company are dead tired.

So the cheery Squire roused himself with an effort, and returned to the grievance which had been rankling in his honest, albeit indignant, breast for the last few days, and attacked Lord Warrington again for having given up both hunting and shooting.

“You have not explained away that grievous offence yet, Warrington,” he called across the table, after first duly repeating the indictment.

He of course knew his ground, and that Hector was always delighted at being called upon to defend one or other of his pet theories.

“I plead guilty,” said the peer, “and am quite

ready to justify my heinous sin of not murdering foxes or game."

"Oh, if you think it cruel——"

"But I don't; nay, more, I think it cruel to the animals to give it up."

"Come, that is a novel idea if you like," said Sir Magnum; "and if you will kindly state your views, I shall be happy to place them before the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals."

"Oh, place them before them all," said the Squire, in allusion to the great number of societies of which the learned baronet was a leading light.

"But although I profess to be no more cruel than my neighbours," pursued Warrington, "I do not go to the length of sacrificing my time and inclinations in shooting grouse and pheasants simply to oblige them, though I know it to be for their happiness."

"I dare say," said Vaia, "that they will excuse you."

"Why, you are not going to tell us," said the M.D., "that they have souls, and that when you decline to martyrise their pretty little bodies, their small spirits are thereby detained upon this wretched world!"

Hector saw that Mrs. Heatherly deemed this profane, and that she was not without anxiety as to what might follow. He accordingly hastened to reassure her.

CHAPTER XX.

A DISCUSSION.

"THERE is one point always lost sight of by those who declare that sport is cruel," said Warrington, "as well as those still more deluded beings who preach vegetarianism on the ground that it is barbarous to slaughter innocent animals that we may feed upon them."

"I am afraid," said Marion, "that I resemble the benighted minority you allude to; for I own to having often doubted whether we have a right to take life at all. I beg pardon for interrupting, but if you can remove my scruples, I shall feel inclined to say a separate grace in your honour every time I sit down to meat."

"You are not at all singular, Miss Heatherly, in having long continued to do what you felt to be right, while fancying it was wrong. They are the conscience pangs occasioned by ignorance. The fact overlooked is that if we did not put all these animals to death, they would never live at all."

"And you think," said the Count de Turgy, "that a life, even with a death sentence as its price, is better than no life at all."

"Certainly. Existence is a blessing, unless the pain exceeds the happiness."

"I agree there," said Mrs. Heatherly.

"And we must remember," said Jack Heatherly, "that animals lose many of our enjoyments, from having only instinct instead of reason——"

"A far less misleading possession," put in the peer.

"Thus they are also without some of our worst sorrows. They are devoid, for instance, both of remorse for the past and fears for the future—both temporal and eternal."

"Yes, reason is a terrible responsibility," sighed one of his sisters.

"And the proudest possession of man," said Sir Magnum.

"But," urged the good dense Squire, "I don't quite see how a pheasant would not be alive because I did not shoot it."

All the young people burst into a saucy laugh at their sire's expense, and then, all talking at once, began to explain the mystery; but he blandly motioned them to silence, intimating that he wished to be enlightened by Warrington alone.

The latter accordingly pursued,—

"Suppose everybody agrees to give up shooting from this moment, of course you would no longer preserve. What game there is would be amicably divided between the poachers and — well, other kinds of vermin. In less than a year there would be hardly a bird or a hare remaining."

"And don't you see, papa dear," said the second Miss Heatherly, "that it would be the same with foxes, sheep, oxen, and all the poor things?"

"Then," said *materfamilias*, "do you consider, Lord Warrington, that it is our duty to procreate the number of God's dumb creatures to the best of our capacity?"

"By no means. Common sense tells us that we are to consult therein nothing but our own convenience. I only want to knock down the absurd plea of cruelty. Is Providence cruel? And yet by the law of nature do not the big fish in the sea feed on the little ones?"

"That is undeniable," she said; "but to return to sport. I shall always think that steeplechasing,

for instance, is very needlessly cruel to the poor horses. Now, Count, do you not agree with me?"

"Candidly, I fear not, madame. I do find both that and hunting truly cruel, but not to the horse, but the man."

"The man!" exclaimed several at once.

"*Naturellement!* Look at our poor broken friend upstairs."

"But nobody forced him to ride," replied Mrs. Heatherly; "whereas a poor horse is bitted, lashed, and spurred. He has no choice in the matter."

"He is well paid for it, though. He is housed, fed, pampered, valeted. Come, he is not such an unlucky brute."

"I rather agree with Lord Warrington," said the baronet. "The man is required to pay a far heavier tax than the horse. You are right when you say no individual need ride against his will; but virtually men are forced thereto when such inducements are brought to bear as public admiration and money."

"There," said De Turgy, "you have an instructive contrast between civilized and half-civilized nations. In my country and yours bull-fighting cannot exist. I except one little degraded corner of my own Bayonne, where the poor bull still stands for a moment longer, but it is on his last legs. This is because it is cruel to the animal more than the man. The man is often killed, to be sure, but the bull always—there is the greatest shame. Sport is not sport unless it remains uncertain."

"Hear, hear," cried old Joe heartily. "Then Spain, you think, Count, is quite behind the age?"

"I do. Humanity, in the sense of being humane, is the unfailing measure or gauge of civilization. But we who are a step in advance should still have the modesty of *parvenus*; for

though a great step, it is only one. Look at your own records! When you reformed prisons and madhouses, you soon after abolished cock-fighting and the prize-ring. Spain will soon be where we are now, but that is not very far."

"All this is very hopeful, I think," said Hector, "because, as I take it, the Count's reasoning is sound. But to return to our starting point. Heatherly wanted to know why I no longer hunt and shoot. Well, for several reasons; but first and foremost, fear."

This unexpected announcement caused a general start; and Vaia looked up at the object of her adoration in blank astonishment.

"Don't tell me!" exclaimed the Squire incredulously.

"Yes, fear," deliberately repeated the speaker, adding, "although I feel that some credit is due to my courage for owning it."

This was altogether too subtle for his host. Somehow or other, nobody believed Warrington's assertion. He did not look like a poltroon, and, moreover, there was more than one little story in circulation to disprove it. On his way from America he had plunged overboard in a storm, and saved the life of one of the crew. At all events, the friends about him to-day sat awaiting his farther explanations with no little curiosity.

"When I say fear," he went on, "I do not refer to my nerves, which were at all times excellent, and, I am grateful to say, remain unimpaired. But though fond of hunting, I gradually got to think that, in my case at least, it was not worth the risk, when added to the great expense, which I could only afford by denying myself other things, and the enormous loss of time involved in the pursuit."

"Well, well, I don't agree, of course, and I can't

see it," said the Squire; "but we'll let huntin' pass for the moment. But what the dickens has all that to do with shootin'? That don't cost a quarter as much, and you can't plead danger there."

"Oh, but I do, and of a far more terrible kind. The worst that can happen to you when hunting is a broken neck, but out shooting, one careless movement on the part of a young hand, and both your eyes are gone for ever!"

"And you would rather die than be blind?" asked Vaia, who thought the sentence rather blasphemous.

"Assuredly!" he answered, with conviction.

"I wonder," said the Squire, almost with temper, "that you ever get on a horse, or go in a train. If one were to think of danger as, to my great surprise, you appear to do, one might as well bring all one's boys up to be Miss Mollys at once!"

"My dear Squire," replied Warrington smiling, "you asked me for an explanation, and I gave it. I consider it abundantly worth while to run remote risks for great ends, and shall therefore continue to ride and use the railway like other people. I have not the smallest objection to others hunting and shooting. On the contrary, I hold that it improves the race of English men and women more and more—adds to the beauty of children, and to the total of national grace and national courage. For all that, I claim the right of every free-born Briton to do as he pleases. If I decline paying my share of the danger by which all these good and great things are secured, well, I am prepared to bear all the odium which attaches to the decision."

"Spoken like a man, *parbleu*, and a true philosopher," said the Count enthusiastically. "It

is in every age the privilege of the truly wise to exempt themselves from the very rules, customs, and laws which they set down, form, and puff up for, the community at large. A great thinker should see at once that it is culpable waste that he himself should be food for powder, like a common fellow."

"Now, I am afraid the Count is laughing at me," said Hector; "but he is quite welcome."

"No, on my honour," laying hand on heart, "and I must say I think the terrible moral pressure brought to bear in this country upon all young men, that they must ride like mad after a fox, is a most cruel type of tyranny."

"There I quite agree," joined in Sir Magnum, who had never bestridden a horse in his life.

"But," urged Heatherly père, "our hunting centres are full of foreigners, many of whom go as straight as dies. Your own country, Count, is devoted to steeplechasing, full of gentlemen riders, and, bless me, didn't a foreigner, Count, win our Grand National not long ago?"

"*Mais oui; mais oui*; but it is quite another affair altogether. Here a man has only to be a good hand across country, as you call it, *mon Dieu*, he is a kind of demi-god. He is celebrated, praised, looked up to as if he were doing something he hated and detested for some great end—perhaps he is!"

"Well, and isn't it so *chez vous*?" asked the Squire, who knew about six words of French, and loved to air them.

"*Tout le contraire*, I assure you. If we do these things, it is because we like them. The world—our French world generally—looks on a man who risks his neck for a hunt or a race as *tant soit peu bête*—not too much brain, you know. We forgive it as an amiable weakness.

Especially if one has a fortune, a position, it is thought that the habitual jeopardizing of the life at five-bar gates and little rivers is pushing politeness to the next heir rather too far."

"I thoroughly share that view," said the peer quite fervently, and thinking of his younger brother, who lay upstairs. But the others laughed at the Count's quaint way of putting it.

Just then, far different laughter was heard without, and the numerous children bounded into the room, causing a welcome diversion from a theme which had lasted too long, and was in itself hardly of a diverting character.

There was one of the party, however, who caught hardly a word of either the sense or nonsense, which floated around from the moment the youthful contingent entered the room.

Vaia sat silent, and was so absorbed in thought, that no amount of hubbub, no scrimmaging for *bonbons*, disturbed her reverie.

She was reflecting on the previous conversation.

"If," she inwardly communed, "I had never seen this Warrington, but had heard him fully, cleverly, and withal justly, described, how much I should dislike him! A man all theories and calculations. True, he is not a prig, nor a conceited fool; but I should most certainly have set him down as both. One who knows to a hair's breadth the fullest merit of his own every gift, act, word! One who, by dint of calculation, has reduced life to a cold exact science, as devoid of surprises, accidents, regrets, and wild hopes as human intellect and will combined can make it. I should exclaim to the describer,—

"‘Point your friend out to me if you will. I feel interested to know what such a man-machine looks like; but on no account introduce him, for he would irritate me to death.’"

"And lo, how different the event! We meet; he makes not the most indirect effort to win me, even by his conversation, either when *tête-à-tête* or in general society, for at all times he seems to be talking more to please himself—as it were, to help himself to think—than for any effect he is to produce on others; and yet—and yet!

"Ah me, how wise were the old poets—my poor father's favourite Æschylus, and others—to paint love as something utterly outside and beyond our own will, taste, almost inclination—a freak of destiny, nothing more, be it curse or blessing!"

And an hour later she was sitting by his side, rather away from the rest. Their talk had been on indifferent subjects, rather trite and commonplace. Presently she said,—

"Shall you ride over to the Towers again to-morrow?"

"Impossible. I must go to town."

This was so utterly unexpected by her, that she could not conceal a slight start.

"I—I did not know you were going," she said simply, and wanted to add that she was sorry.

To any indifferent person she would have thought it only the civil thing to say; but with this man it was far otherwise.

But how superfluous are words to love! Is not this why *Lieder* are more eloquent without them?

He knew she was sorry—knew it for certain. Not from the good opinion he held of himself, though that was high. Hector was not like so many of his inferiors, given to fancying that women were in love with him unless they were. But he was a great seeker after truth in all forms, and his practice and experience in reading human nature led him to believe that in the case of Miss Temple he had made a considerable impression.

For something to say, she added,—

“I wonder if you will ever see any more of your friend with the picture—‘the Count,’ as you call him!”

“*Chi lo sa!* I have a presentiment that I shall.”

“Oh, how dreadful! I hope you won’t be attacked by burglars; and mamma says you have so many things in your house to tempt them. If they should come, let them take what they like, but pray do not attempt to fight with them or stop them.”

“It is very sweet of you to care.”

Then she remembered she had been too much carried away in her anxiety for his safety. She coloured and looked down. At last she said,—

“I am always seeing in the papers how little they think of taking life if any one attempts to stop them.”

“Yes,” thought Lord Warrington, “she does love me. Whether she will do so when she knows all—ah! that is the question!”

CHAPTER XXI.

AN ENGAGEMENT.

A FEW days subsequent to Lord Warrington's departure, his brother was for the first time able to obtain the local doctor's permission to come downstairs.

There is nothing intrinsically incapacitating in a broken collar-bone, beyond the necessity of having the arm on the same side firmly strapped across the chest, the tops of the fingers coming just to the front part of the opposite shoulder. Indeed, cases have been known of men—we by no means suggest that they were prudent ones—being seen out for a quiet ride two days after the accident.

But in the instance of Augustus de Nares, much fever had supervened, and he had to pay the penalty of his reckless young life, more especially as regards his want of abstemiousness, in the form of a slow and somewhat painful recovery.

The enforced great moderation in stimulants to which he was unaccustomed now made him look very pale, and feel all the lowness of spirits inherent in such reaction. Moreover, ever since the worst had been passed, he suffered in no small degree from boredom.

Bold as he usually was, he did not dare ask that Marion should be allowed to visit him—not even as a Sister of Mercy nursing the sick.

It was as well he refrained, as Mrs. Heatherly would hardly have permitted such a thing, even under her own *chaperonage*; and what this un-

reasonable youth wanted, would have been that she should have come to him alone.

For "Mrs. Squire," as she was sometimes called, had the same effect upon Augustus as had all thoroughly good and respectable people, she bored him excessively. The reason that Marion formed an exception to this general rule, was because he had conceived a caprice for her which he dignified by the name of love.

He could not help admitting, and indeed sometimes condescended to say, that he had been treated by both host and hostess with a consideration and kindness which nothing could surpass. Still, he told himself over and over again that they bored him to death.

So De Nares felt that there was nothing for it but to obey the doctor, and get well as fast as possible.

And now he is downstairs for the first time, and stretched luxuriantly upon the sofa in Mrs. Heatherly's boudoir. It is not to *bouder*, however. He has his wish at last. Marion is by his side, working away—and they are alone.

The girl is very happy, too.

She possesses youth, a tender heart, and that first of all requisites for loving a man, almost total ignorance of what he really is.

Not but what her friend Vaia has conscientiously done her duty in warning her against him, as Warrington bade her. There was no great merit in that. She would at this time probably have done almost anything he told her to do, without either question or remonstrance.

Still, as she carried out his behest, it was purely with a sense of duty performed.

Even at Vaia's age women know how surely a flame is fanned by well nigh any form of opposition. But the fact of a measure being all but hopeless did not prevent her from taking it.

Marion had listened with every appearance of deference and good temper. She loved and looked up to Vaia far too much not to do so. But instead of for a moment thinking any less enthusiastically, or less seriously, of this, the first man she had loved, the step so reluctantly taken had no other effect than to make her somewhat prejudiced and unjust towards Lord Warrington himself.

"Why," she asked herself, with that indignant voice which everybody keeps for talking to those who cannot hear them—"why should he run down his own brother, and one so many years younger than himself? If he has faults, let people find them out for themselves; it would be time enough! Has my lord, pray, no faults of his own, that he should be so busy about his poor brother's? I can't bear a man who abuses his own relations."

Now all this was fair-sounding enough to her own pretty little ears, and, considering that she knew so little about either of the brothers, only what was to be expected.

But, angry as "Maid Marion" was, she would let out no such thoughts as these to Vaia, because she truly loved her friend, and her friend, she knew, loved Hector.

And so this very young pair are sitting together, as they have both been longing to do for days, and everybody else has gone out. Three o'clock has just struck, and the bright afternoon sun of advancing spring floods the room, and touches their very souls with his fire.

She says,—

"You know Lady Amaranth will be back to-morrow?"

"No, I did not. Hood is better, then?"

"Oh, yes. They say there never was such a recovery."

"He was not mad, then?"

"Oh dear, no. It was a bad attack of brain fever; but, mercifully, no worse than that."

"Tell me—it was an awful scene, I suppose. I haven't been able to get out of any one what really passed. Were you near?"

"Yes; quite close by. Oh, do not ask me about it, please! It was too terrible. I had never seen anything really horrible before, and I could not sleep after it for several nights."

"Poor dear little girl!"

"Of course, at first no one dreamt of illness or madness. It sounded as if one man was going to tear another to pieces. Oh, there, I am wrong to think of it." And she covered her face with her hands.

"And what is supposed to have caused the attack—of illness, I mean?"

"Well," said Marion, "I think I do know, but——" and she bent down over her work.

"If you know what no one else does—or won't own they do—I should like to know."

"But I do not think I ought to say."

"Well, if you can't trust me——"

"Oh, I am *sure* it is not that," disclaimed Marion.

"Then I am sure you might just tell me. I have so much to tell you."

"You have?" she said, looking at him quite innocently.

"I have, indeed—heaps!"

"And you won't tell me unless I trust you with this?"

And there was just a touch of roguishness in both tone and eyes as she said this.

"Not a syllable!"

"You see, I am only afraid of betraying confidence."

"I'll be mute as the grave."

"Well, then—but I want you to look upon it only as my own idea."

"Yes, yes, of course—your own idea. Well?"

"I feel sure poor Mr. Hood has been for some time madly in love, and he——"

"Who with? Vaia Temple, of course?"

"Yes."

"And did she care for him?"

"To say truth, I don't think she ever did."

"Quite right. I don't think much of him."

"No! Well, I suppose he is not what would be called a man's man."

"No, nor a woman's either, I should say," laughed De Nares.

"Ah, poor fellow! But he is really very nice when you know him well."

"Oh, come, I say now, I hope you don't care for him, do you?"

"Yes, indeed. He has been so kind to me, and when you get him to yourself, he talks delightfully, and knows—oh, you can't think how much he has read."

"I hope you are not in love with him."

"Mr. de Nares! I never even had such an idea."

"That's lucky!"

"For me?"

"Oh dear, no—for me."

"But now you have got to fulfil your condition. What have you got to tell me?"

"Oh, you shall know fast enough; but first finish about Hood. Do you mean that mere love drove him out of his mind?"

"No, no; it was finding out that Vaia Temple did not care for him."

"And had she led him to believe she did?"

Marion paused ere she answered. She was a very honourable little thing, yet she could not bear that her companion should think she grudged him her confidence.

"I am afraid she let him believe she would accept him."

"She must be a sad flirt."

"Oh, no; she is goodness itself! She never wilfully misled anybody; but I think for once she deceived herself."

"Ah, well, I can feel for poor Hood, though I don't like him."

"That is kind of you," she said simply.

"Yes, poor beggar. I have a fellow-feeling for him—I'm in love myself."

This startled poor Marion as much as would a declaration from a total stranger. It happened to be the last thing she expected at that particular moment.

She knew he could only be alluding to herself; yet, truthful as she was, she could not for the life of her refrain from exclaiming, in a tone of assumed surprise,—

"No! Are you really?"

"Yes, quite really. And I'm like poor Hood—it isn't returned."

"No!" cried Marion with *naïve* but most flattering surprise, and beginning to doubt whether it was with her after all that he was in love.

After a pause, she asked, with the most wretchedly acted indifference, and toying with the *bibelots* on the table at her side,—

"And are you going to tell me all about her? Is that what you alluded to just now as having to say?"

Augustus was in his element. He was a born male flirt. The fun as well as the sentiment of the occasion was intensely relished by him; and had his fair listener dared to turn her head, she would have been enlightened by the roguish merriement which lurked in his eye.

He was not bored now.

"Yes," he replied, in a sad voice. "It will be a comfort to tell you all. You will feel for me, won't you, dear? Perhaps — perhaps you have loved yourself?"

"Oh, never mind me. Tell me about—about this girl."

"I cannot allow you to call her that."

"I beg your pardon—I meant nothing rude. She is not a widow, I suppose?"

"Not yet; though, of course, I may make her one. I think a world of her."

"I have no doubt."

No—he could not be alluding to her. His previous professions before his accident had been mere *fleurette*; and she had appeared to believe them. How mortifying! She hoped she was not going to cry.

"Well," he resumed, "first, as to her appearance. She is dark as night, and very tall. I should say nearly six feet."

There! She knew it was not herself!

"Stay!" he pursued. "I am wrong; that is another."

"Another!"

"I mean the girl a friend of mine loves." This time Marion did turn and look at him. "I was mixing them up."

"I see, you have been joking all the time."

"Yes, merely fooling, of course."

"I think you are very silly."

"But one thing was no jest. I am madly in love."

"Oh, I dare say! I shan't believe anything you say now; and if I knew the young lady in question, I should just warn her against you."

She looked prettier than ever as she said this.

Suddenly he caught her by the hand, and pulled her towards him.

"Mr. de Nares!"

But he only said,—

"Oh, mean! I did not think you were a coward!"

"A coward! Oh, please let me go!"

"Yes, a coward, to struggle with a poor crippled man."

"Then let me go. You frighten me—you are so rough. What are you doing? What do you want?"

"What should I want, you little stupid, but a kiss?"

"I think it is very rude and dishonourable of you." She was still resisting. "Think of that girl you love."

"She does not care for me."

"How do you know?"

"Because it is *you*!"

And thereupon this sweet young fly fell into this wicked spider's net.

She found it was not a kiss but a great many he wanted, and she could not get away; for though he had only one sound arm, it proved very strong, and the more he kissed her, the more she blushed, for she had never been embraced before, save by her father, and sometimes—as a great favour—by a brother.

And the more she blushed, the lovelier she looked, and that set the kisses going again like hail, or like mad, or whatever the proper expression may be; and it was only after a long time—quite a minute—that she obtained a ruffled and panting liberty by the barefaced device of pretending she heard a footman approaching the door.

And after the pleasure, Augustus thought of the price—that universal factor in all human joys. He never thought of it beforehand. He must propose to her, of course. She, poor innocent, very pro-

perly considered that done, or she would have rung the bell, and screamed like a little Trojan before she would have let him touch her lips.

The Honourable Augustus had not the slightest objection to wedding this dear dainty little girl, for that, of course, meant a provision found for him by somebody.

"That prig of a brother of his, who always cried poverty, yet never seemed in want of money for a picture, or a statue, or any other caprice which entered his stuck-up head, must be good enough to fork out. If he were so unreasonable as to decline, why then, of course, the marriage must be broken off. Now, should the girl's heart chance to be broken at the same time—well, he could not help that. He must absolutely enliven that otherwise dull convalescence of his. He could not be bored."

But in his heart De Nares knew perfectly well that he had behaved like a brute and a coward. He had knocked about the world enough to be thoroughly versed in the code of honour, however little he might trouble himself about its practice; and he knew full well that while a labouring man has a perfect right to ask a lass of his own degree to join in her lot with his, and trust to his strong arms and the joint sweat of their brows, no penniless gentleman may win the affections of a gently nurtured woman without a reasonable hope of being able to maintain her in the position of a lady.

To such a degree did Augustus realize all this, that he lost no time in impressing upon Marion the absolute necessity of keeping their engagement a dead secret for the present.

"Only just for the present, dearest, you know," he said, in the softest voice.

But the staunch little Marion was honestly surprised, and she astonished her lover by the candour—not unmixed, he thought, with just a grain of

indignation—with which she received this unlooked-for damper to her joys.

Of course she never doubted his good faith, never dreamt that he at that very time was looking upon their marriage as more than problematical. She only thought he was seeking honestly to further both their interests by means which were not quite honest.

"I always thought it was wrong," she told him, "not to tell one's parents at once."

"So it would be, of course, in the case of a stranger—any friend of your own whom they did not know. But with me it is quite different. A guest in their house—brother of such an old friend of theirs! Besides, it is only for a few days. You see, Hector is such a queer fellow. Nothing would offend him so much as hearing the news from any other quarter before I told him myself. Why, he might refuse to do anything for me at all."

He said this as if it would be the most monstrous act on his brother's part imaginable.

"Well, then," pleaded Marion, taking it all for gospel, "one thing you will not deny me, for you must feel we may trust her. You will let me tell my one great friend, Vaia Temple; she is loyalty itself."

An evil expression came over his handsome face as he replied, with a touch of evident irritation,—

"What do you want to tell any one for? My darling, can you not be guided by me? No; I happen to have especial reasons for not wishing Miss Vaia to know anything about it."

And so poor Marion had to make the best of it, and comforted herself with the reflection that she could do as she pleased after all, for Augustus had only ordered; he had extracted no promise.

She little knew that, from long self-experience, he had ceased to believe in them, even in others.

CHAPTER XXII.

SIR MAGNUM PRESCRIBES.

It was an enormous relief to Lady Amaranth Temple when her nephew Clarence, after an unusually close tussle with death, achieved the utmost that mortal man can aspire to in such a conflict, and cast off his enemy for an indefinite time.

"There was really no sort of reason," Sir Magnum Bonum and several more of the shining lights of the curative great world declared, "why the young man should not make as old bones—to use the consecrated phrase—as any of them. Mad! Not a bit of it. There were none of the signs of lunacy. He had had brain fever—a common complaint enough, and one to which every grade of constitution is subject under given circumstances—a very bad attack of brain fever, and that was all."

Lady Amaranth was deeply grateful to Providence for this verdict.

As a thorough justification, or at least excuse, for the *esclandre* at the ball, brain fever was a much more satisfactory scapegoat than dementia; for once the tyrant madness, that dread usurper upon reason's throne, were known to have held sway over her nephew—not only would society—Lady Amaranth's universe—be evermore prepared for some fresh and fearful outbreak of the disease, but she herself would be doomed for the rest of her life to suffer from the same dread.

In his many confidential interviews with her,

Sir Magnum spoke, and very properly, with the greatest freedom. He required to be told no secrets; poor Hood's delirious ravings furnished enough data and to spare for the physician to erect his own theories, with all the completeness desirable. And while the patient's life hung in the balance, he kept his inferences to himself; for should death supervene, where would be the profit of intruding upon the bereaved aunt's grief, with a vainglorious exhibition of his well-known astuteness.

But no sooner had convalescence set in in earnest, than the baronet commenced his precautions against relapse.

"The question, dear Lady Amaranth, is this," he said to her at one of these conferences. "What are you going to do with him when I grant him his ticket-of-leave from the prison of bed?"

"To do with him? Why, I have not had time to think of that yet. Do with him, you ask? Why, pet and make much of him, to be sure," she replied.

"But, delightful as I should myself think the process at your hands," he said, with just enough of a smile to excuse the gallantry of the remark, and not enough to rob it of some smack of sincerity, "it will be quite insufficient for the purpose."

"Then pray, pray tell me how to proceed."

"Unless we can hit upon some clever device, I greatly fear your nephew's recovery will not prove a genuine one. It has two probable sequels, both equally disastrous. He will either return with his old enthusiasm to—to the cause of all the mischief—— Lady Amaranth, I have your permission to be perfectly candid?"

"Yes, yes, by all means."

"To his love for Miss Vaia; or else—which is

quite as probable—he will seem to have forgotten all about her, and will dwindle and die from the vacuum she leaves in his heart.”

“How terrible!” exclaimed Lady Amaranth, in deep and real distress, and yet withal amazed at his perspicacity. “No doubt you would suggest the finding him a fresh idol in the place of the one he has lost? In the case of most men such a course would be as practicable as wise. But you have had few opportunities of learning what the poor boy’s passion for my ungrateful girl amounted to, and——”

“Pardon me, I only venture to interrupt you because I was far from imagining that any other young lady could possibly prove an acceptable substitute for Miss Temple.”

“Then I am afraid I do not understand,” went on her ladyship, characteristically overlooking the little fact that she had not yet given her friend a chance to explain himself.

Sir Magnum, however, was quite used to women and their ways—fashionable ones especially—and he pursued,—

“I was not thinking of earth, but of heaven.”

Whether his listener saw a marked incongruity between this eminently worldly man and that holy place, or not, she nearly laughed outright as she said,—

“But, my dear friend, I thought you were not going to let him go there just yet?”

“Nor am I.” He was as sharp as a needle, and knew quite well why she laughed. “I need hardly tell you, who know me so well, that I am no better than I ought to be, and certainly have not the hypocrisy to pass for a saint.”

“Then what of heaven?”

“I confess that if your relation’s illness had proceeded from too much religious fervour——”

"A rare excess in these days!"

"In fashionable society, yes; but outside that charmed and charming circle, there is no more common source of disease, mania, and death."

"You don't say so?" said the lady incredulously.

"Not to enter into that now," he pursued, "I will merely remark that, had such been the case, I should now have prescribed love."

"And as it was not?"

"I appeal to religion."

"To religion!" Then, after a short pause—"I am very foolish, I dare say; but I cannot help feeling rather shocked."

"I expected you to be."

"Without being exactly what you call a particularly religious woman, I have always striven to be as good as I reasonably could——"

"I am sure of it."

"That is in my position, where the calls of one's station are so many, and—somehow one never has time to do half the good one intends."

"No doubt."

"But for all that, Sir Magnum, I have a reverent spirit, and——"

This time Sir Magnum interrupted, because her ladyship's account of her spiritual state failed to inspire the interest which his position compelled him to feign.

"Believe me—for I am more of a theologian than you think for—there is no sort of harm in doing an undoubtedly good action merely because we have a motive for it, which, while innocent in itself, is yet not that one by which we are in duty compelled."

"No; you are right so far, I must admit."

"Very well then. Here is a young man, who, as you have often told me, has been piously brought up. He has just escaped from the very

jaws of death. The earthly satisfaction of which his soul was lately enamoured has failed him altogether. What then more proper than that he should now devote at least some weeks to thanksgiving for his recovery? Why should his mind not be directed to the view that trials are sent for our improvement, to induce us to put aside our idols of clay, and look to what is higher and everlasting. Let him say, with Ferdinand,—

‘ En moi par l’amour d’une femme
De Dieu l’amour avait faibli,
Pitié, Seigneur, rends moi mon âme!
Pitié, Seigneur, rends moi l’oubli!’ ”

Undoubtedly the fashionable Esculapius had a wonderfully special way of saying things in themselves commonplace enough, for after having so lately made the *grande dame* laugh, he now fairly caused her, not to weep, but to wipe a tiny tear out of the corner of one eye.

She was converted; she saw the matter now in the light in which the great Sir Magnum—with all those prestige-giving initials following his name, like pages in waiting—set it before her.

It must be remembered, moreover, that she could devise no other course which bore half the promise of this one.

So she thanked and congratulated her friend, whom she declared to be the physician of souls and bodies, and inquired whether he was going to be good enough personally to exhort her nephew to turn his thoughts to holiness.

“Heaven forbid,” he exclaimed. “I would as soon think of cutting off a leg, because I ordered the operation. How, then, you would ask, are we to proceed to action?”

"I confess," she said, "I do not myself feel competent to the task."

"I never intended you should attempt it. No—we must bring fresh influence to bear. I have recently met on more than one occasion at Studfield, a divine who strikes me as singularly suited——" he was going to say, "suited to the business," but he checked himself in time, and changed it to "gifted and adapted to the pious task."

"You refer to Mr. Latimer, the Vicar?"

Sir Magnum nodded.

"Admirable! I will write to him this very day. Fortunately, dear Clarence already knows him slightly, and so it will not be like receiving a total stranger."

"Just so, and you will naturally not forget to tell our interesting patient that the clergyman is not sent for because he is worse, but because he is better."

"Oh, very true. Thanks for reminding me. Ah! there is luncheon. You must be hungry after your journey."

"I seldom have time to be hungry during the day. No, dear Lady Amaranth; I return by the next train!"

"Must it be so? Oh, what a severe tax upon eminence! and you must have breakfasted so early to catch the express down. You are quite sure you cannot stay for once?"

"Impossible! The dear Duchess of Altamont would be quite nervous if she did not see me at five."

"Well, give her my love. How is she?"

He shook his head.

"Worse? really? I am very sorry. What is it?"

"No specific disorder, but her nerves! Her nerves are dreadful!"

"Ah, poor thing! A most lovable woman!"

"Yes, indeed, and a most generous one."

"I am glad to hear you say that. But you see she is so enormously rich."

"Yes; but that is not always a reason."

"No, no, to be sure. Well, if you must go——"

"Good-bye, good-bye!"

And when he was gone, she called out in the passage to make him promise to take at least a biscuit and a glass of wine at the station.

And that very day she wrote a charming letter to Mr. Latimer, who lost no time in responding, and not later than on the morrow he paid his first sick call on the invalid.

He entered upon this new field for his zeal with perhaps the more gusto from having met with a most unnecessary snub on the part of that ill-bred young noble, the Honourable Augustus, at Studfield.

Although the latter had not been in any danger, pious Mrs. Heatherly was not the woman to let such an opportunity escape her beneficent efforts as the having an unreclaimed and self-avowed Buddhist tied by the leg, so to speak, beneath her roof.

Having accordingly primed the good divine as to the work in hand, she had brought him to De Nares' bedside in the guise of a mere friendly visitor; had then, as she thought, adroitly led the conversation to matters of faith, and finally left them together.

But Latimer had rejoined her in the drawing-room after the lapse of so very few minutes, that it was evident he had either carried off an unexpectedly speedy victory, or been routed at the first skirmish.

The fact was that De Nares, with his native sharpness—one of his few merits, by the bye—had

at once seen through the pious fraud, as he mentally termed this well-meant manœuvre for his soul's good; and his broken bone not contributing to soften his usually execrable temper, he made no scruple of resenting it.

This he did by responding to the clergyman's remarks with the most cool but polished blasphemy.

"If we are to talk upon these matters with any fruit," he had said, with a sweet smile, but one only assumed to render him more irritating—"concealment on my part is out of the question. Remember, the subject is not of my seeking; so you have no right, my dear sir, to complain if I am so unfortunate as to shock you."

"I have understood," said the other, "that you have travelled much in India and other parts, and have become somewhat infatuated with the poetic creed of Buddha."

"Yes, I suppose so, for if I am anything, I may be called a Buddhist."

This was enunciated with all the vainglory of a foolish and profoundly ignorant young man, who deemed it grand and intellectual to believe in nothing.

Now Mr. Latimer was really a man of learning, and had studied the singular creed of so many millions of Easterns with no little assiduity. Three minutes were therefore amply sufficient to convince him not only that Lord Warrington's brother was no true Buddhist, but that he knew little or nothing about the subject.

As soon as De Nares discovered that he was found out, he tried to extricate himself from his rather humiliating position.

"Oh yes; I own I have forgotten most of it now. I have lost interest in the thing, because I have gone beyond it."

"Beyond Buddhism! You surprise me. I thought that went far enough for anybody."

Then Augustus proceeded to declare that he no longer believed in a Divine Being, a soul, free-will—in short, anything whatever; and the divine very properly took a curt leave of him, saying as he did so,—

"It is quite evident, my poor young friend, that the only sensible thing I can do at present is to pray for you."

Thus each in his way felt considerably snubbed, especially Augustus.

To the "Well?" with which Mrs. Heatherly greeted him downstairs, the clergyman replied,—

"There is no good to be done by talking to him. I am ready, I trust, to confront not only heresy, but sheer disbelief in all its forms. I have done so frequently, and I am grateful to say, sometimes, under God's blessing, with success. I will reason, argue, persuade, I hope patiently, undismayed by error the most ghastly, apparently the most hopeless. But there is one quality which the applicant must bring to the great work, and which is painfully wanting in the case of our poor young friend."

"Yes, yes; and that is——"

"A reverent spirit."

This last requisite to the success of his ministrations, he was, at least, certain to find in the sorely tried invalid at Northdown Towers.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SECRETS.

PROUD and happy in the first emotion of her engagement, it is probable that Marion would have been too completely under the spell which De Nares had thrown over her to disregard his injunction as to absolute secrecy, even in the case of her well-beloved Vaia, had Miss Temple been at any distance such as required the deliberate resort to pen, ink, and paper, in order that her young favourite should confide in her.

But it is one thing to refrain from sitting down to write a letter—quite another to barricade your bosom against the solicitous love of a warm and ever-watchful friend.

And this the inexperienced little girl who had affianced herself so rashly was destined to find out on the very day that young De Nares had made his fierce and reckless declaration.

Oh, that last hour when girl-friends meet in the perilous seclusion of their own rooms! What an altogether incalculable amount of reserve will thaw beneath its charm!

If they met there to alter dresses or designs for dresses, to read novels, poetry, or theology aloud; then, indeed, it were far otherwise. But given two intimate, affectionate friends, whose great delight is to watch each other's faces, the interest, humour, curiosity, and, above all, the surprise which their expanding confidences call forth,—much allowance for human nature must surely be made under such exasperatingly tempting circumstances.

On an occasion of the kind, compare, in imagination, the vast difference between the enjoyment of the nocturnal interview, when there is a grand secret to be confided, and when that supreme element of bliss to women is absent from the conference.

Yes; prudence will ever be held by them as quite the least attractive, while incontestably one of the most respectable of virtues.

How often, unlike the two friends on the present occasion, they meet simply in preference to going to bed—the tea or coffee they have drunk counting probably for something in the mischief plot,—with only a modified confidence in their mutual wisdom and secrecy, and each young lady tells herself beforehand,—

“I don’t care how much I hear, but I shall be careful what I say.”

And then, commonplaces having been duly tried for ten minutes, and found productive of only an ominous yawn or two, the most expansive of the pair says to herself,—

“Suppose I told her? I think she is safe enough.”

Then aloud,—

“I’ve a great mind to tell you something, if you will swear never to breathe it.”

“A secret! Oh, how delightful!” exclaims the other, moving close up to her side, and feeling certain it can only be of one kind.

“She loves then! But who?”

Grammar does not signify when talking to one’s self.

Then oaths are taken which correspond to what the typical Frenchman means when he appeals to *la tombe de ma mère*; prodigal caresses are super-added, and the poor shy little secret is dragged forth—sometimes, at least, to be a secret no more; no, not even *un secret à deux*.

'Then the next morning! The first thought of the too-confiding one is—"Heaven! can I have been such a fool?" That, we fear, is the every-night version of such affairs.

Far different was the communing on this particular midnight between Vaia and Marion.

Hallowed by long years of growing love, respect, and trustfulness as was their intercourse, the only danger would have been if the younger of the two had been deterred by a mistaken feeling of loyalty to her betrothed, as she considered Augustus, from telling the discreet Vaia everything.

But whatever scruples of the kind were brought by the third Miss Heatherly to this meeting, they could fortunately make no stand against the fond onslaught of words, arms, and lips, which Vaia brought to bear so soon as the door was shut behind them.

"My darling, you have something to tell me! I have been watching you the whole evening. Oh, I do hate being a wet blanket! yet I cannot but hope and pray it is not what I fear. May, my little pet, speak to me!"

It may well be conceived that the gentle Vaia's embraces had a particularly holy savour to her *protégée*—for such in a sense Marion was—after so recently being crushed up, though only with one arm, against the unscrupulous breast of so wild a spark as the Honourable Augustus. Anyhow, amid smiles and tears, she told her tender young mentor all.

"But, my darling," said Vaia, "what am I to do? How act? I suppose it is no manner of use scolding you."

"Not a bit," replied the childish lover roguishly.

"Unfortunately, dear, life cannot be acted out as a farce; no, nor as a comedy even."

"But youth can."

"Not even that in your case. See! it is kinder to be brutal with you from the first, to pluck this evil plant from your breast before it takes deep root."

"Oh, but it has already."

"May, I say—May, my child, this marriage must not, shall not be. Do you hear?"

"Now, Vaia, you mean well, I know. I am so certain you love me, that such an assurance seems absurd almost; but do listen to common sense and justice."

Vaia could not repress a smile.

"Go on," she said.

"If you had a friend, older, wiser than yourself, who stood towards you as you do to me; and if this woman whom you loved—mind you, with all your heart—came and said, 'Your fondest hopes must be abandoned, prudence commands it'; would you not say as I do to you, 'Ask me anything else, for that I cannot give up'? Now, Vaia dearest, tell me truly, would not that be your answer?"

"I know what you mean. I will not pretend but that I understand to what particular hopes you so delicately refer."

"Very well; I am glad of it. Now what do you say?"

"That the cases are not parallel. I feel only too certain that this De Nares is not only unworthy of you—I suppose, you little fairy, I should admit very few men to be worthy of your small hand—but that he is quite undeserving of the affection or respect of any decent man or woman."

"Vaia!" exclaimed the girl, turning pale.

"Mind, I am not referring to the nonsense he may talk about his religion, or of his having none. The world has long since found out that to exact anything definite from people in the shape of a creed

is only to promote hypocrisy. *En revanche*, society is very exacting on certain matters of conduct."

"So it ought to be. Now, be specific, please. What have you to say against Augustus?"

"Augustus! Already!"

"Certainly; we are engaged."

"No girl who respects herself should consider herself so while her lover forbids her to publish the engagement."

"But it is solely to diminish and overcome the obstacles to our marriage that he asks me to trust him in this respect for a very short time."

"My poor child, that is an old device! Besides, no honourable man would have embraced the girl he really meant to make his wife, and at the same time bind her to secrecy."

"All men are not equally cold-blooded," said poor Marion, blushing scarlet; "and I am very glad I did let him kiss me, because that alone makes it impossible for me ever to marry another."

"If you are destined for some one else, it is certainly a pity," said Vaia, with a peculiar smile, "that your future husband should not be the first to touch your lips."

"Why, Vaia, you must be dreaming! How could I ever marry another after that? If I told him, he would break off the marriage, and if I concealed so important a thing, it would be most treacherous and vile."

"My darling, I love you for saying all that; but you do not yet know the world. There would be no harm in telling a subsequent proposer. He would be sorry, I daresay, but if he really loved you, and believed that at the time the little event happened you fully believed yourself to be engaged, he would not think much of it, and would exclaim to himself, 'How much she must love *me* to volunteer such an avowal!'"

"You amaze me!" said Marion, still with that touching seriousness she had maintained throughout.

They had been sitting opposite one another at each side of the fire, which burned brightly in the grate, despite the advancing spring.

Here Vaia rose, and coming across the hearthrug, knelt down at her little friend's feet, with an action purely playful, that had not the smallest taint of the dramatic about it, and leaning her fair arms upon Marion's lap, looked fondly and admiringly into her face.

"May," she said, "I often think I love you more than I do myself. I certainly can imagine no sacrifice I would not make for you. I do not expect you to love me like that. Do not think me conceited when I say you cannot. Love me to the best of your power. I ask no more. Now, dearest child, there is one thing I could not bear, and from sheer self-love—from anxiety for my own peace—I mean to avert it if act of mine can do so."

"Well, what is it? Not to give him up?"

"Whether you give him up, or he gives you up, I care little, but you shall never be wretched with him."

"I hope not."

"May, as I kneel here, if ever you are that man's wife, you will be wretched."

"And is all this because he asked me not to tell even my parents of our engagement for just a few days?"

"What if I know more?"

"Then why not trust me as I do you?"

"I have a reason. Oh, have confidence enough in me to ask no more to-night! And now go and sleep. But first, pray—yes, pray fervently—pray hard for light; and I will say many prayers for you as well. Oh, Marion! I have such a belief in prayer! It seems to me if we had been born in some barbarous wilderness, and never taught the name of God, that

the longing to pray to our heavenly Father would have revealed His existence to our hearts."

"Oh, Vaia, how good you are! I shall never be like you; but I do love prayer too!"

Then, as she kissed her friend "Good-night," she added, "If Augustus has no true faith, it would be terrible, would it not?"

"Most awful, darling; and don't you give him any more of your love until you know both that and many other things concerning him."

And so the conference ended; and what with the real influence which Vaia exercised so deservedly over the young girl, and what with a certain incongruity which Marion discovered, when presently she knelt at her bedside, between all holy things and the Honourable Augustus de Nares,—certain it is that she lay her pretty head upon her pillows in a more soothed but far less settled frame of mind than she would have believed possible only one short hour ago.

Now, as will easily have been divined, Vaia Temple's strongly expressed opposition to the match was almost entirely based upon the timely warning which Lord Warrington had thought fit to give her. At her first attempt, a few days back, to influence Marion by a judicious hint upon the subject, the well-meant move had not been too complacently received by the infatuated young lady.

It was on this account that Vaia had never referred to Warrington during the present interview. And in this she was wise.

To her own mind, however, it was as gospel that the elder brother had spoken with only the purest motives, and also with the weightiest cause.

This was in her mind when just now she said, "I have a reason."

If she was right, then Marion's eyes must be opened at all costs, and at once; and her influence must not be weakened by citing a reason for her

convictions, which, however unimpeachable, was of little account to Marion's prejudiced ears.

Vaia's first thought on waking next morning was, "What more can I do?"

It was very early—scarcely seven o'clock; yet she soon felt the need to be up and doing. It was only after she had risen that it occurred to her to write to Warrington. The hot blood rushed to her face at the idea. Would he think it a mere excuse on her part for addressing him—for beginning a correspondence? Perhaps! Yet if her real object were to serve her little friend, should a false, or at least selfish, pride make her hesitate?

Then, again, had she a right to act upon what the girl had told her?

No promise, it is true, had been either asked for or given; but that was a mere technicality. Was not the whole interview obviously confidential?

She believed so. Yet, on the other hand, was not Lord Warrington already quite aware of how matters stood? Moreover, was this De Nares not himself playing a most underhand and perhaps treacherous game? And is it a breach of honour to betray a traitor?

Suffice it to say that Miss Temple's deliberations and hesitations, after lasting for the best part of a quarter of an hour, ended in her suddenly seizing her pen, and, with the muttered exclamation—"No matter! I *must* do it!"—sitting down and writing as follows:—

"DEAR LORD WARRINGTON,—

"You will wonder what I am going to write to you about when I begin by saying that I must bind you to secrecy. I myself have made no such vow, and I consider it my duty to consult you.

"You know how very dear to me is our sweet

young friend, Marion Heatherly. Well, only yesterday I noticed that she had something on her mind, though she did her best to conceal it, even from me.

"So I took her by storm when I got her into my room at night—where we nearly always have a chat when under the same roof,—and I wrung the whole truth from her. It appears that during the afternoon,—he has been allowed by the doctor to come down of late,—while we others were all out of doors, May had been deputed to stay in and do hostess to the invalid. He profited by the occasion to make a declaration of love and an offer of marriage. But the worst of it is, she accepted him, although he insisted absolutely that the engagement must be kept a dead secret, even from her father and mother.

"I assure you I had duly warned her when you were good enough to give me a hint as to Mr. de Nares not being exactly the most likely of men to turn out a model husband. But you see it was in vain.

"I think, however, I made some impression last night.

"I write for advice and counsel, although I hardly see what you can suggest while I bind you not to show that you know anything. But I feel very miserable about my friend, and it is a relief to confide in some one.

"Marion would never forgive me if she knew what I am doing; but I would tell her—would do anything on earth—rather than see her wretched.

"Believe me,

"Sincerely yours,

"VAIA TEMPLE.

"STUDFIELD, *April 25th.*"

CHAPTER XXIV

SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL.

SIR MAGNUM had acted with his wonted discernment or his usual luck, when he summoned in the doctor of souls to aid the physician of bodies in the case of Clarence Hood.

Limiting his conversation almost entirely to secular subjects upon his first two visits, the Reverend Ambrose Latimer had, during his third interview, gradually revealed his chief object in coming; and his spiritual aid had been so willingly, nay, so earnestly received, that the subsequent stages in the complete "awakening" of this young man promised to prove a very labour of love to the excellent divine.

Although Vaia Temple's name had several times occurred in casual chat, no word had been said concerning Clarence's love for her—a subject upon which the Vicar had been well primed by the young lady's mother.

It was well that the invalid should gradually become used to the mention of her name, thus impressing him with the fact that no one considered her a dangerous subject as regarded himself.

Latimer, as a staunch Protestant, had no leaning towards auricular confession, except, indeed, in certain very rare and abnormal cases; and it was far more of Hood's future life here below, than anything regarding the past, that the pious man took heed.

Yet he well knew that while whole and complete confession is, humanly speaking, one of the most

repellent and agonizing of all forms of penance and compensation to the vast majority of mortals, it is in the experience of many wise and sympathetic persons, besides that of nearly all clergymen, to meet with individuals who, without any very heinous crimes to reproach themselves for, seem literally possessed with the rage for confession.

Such persons are, for the most part, women; but the mania—for such it often amounts to—is by no means limited to the pious sex, as it has been called, *par excellence*, nor—and this is most extraordinary of all—to spiritual things or purposes.

Who among the wise does not remember exclaiming, in an *accès* of mingled pity and amazement, on being made the involuntary recipient of some unsuspected lapse from the narrow path: “Why in the world do you tell me this?” And the reasons forthcoming are seldom any reasons at all.

Latimer foresaw, from wide experience of consciences, that his latest neophyte would probably develop sooner or later into one of these over-confidential spirits, although for the present he seemed content enough to listen, and no more.

The Vicar on his third visit had taken occasion to speak as follows,—

“If there be no common ground whatever, all discussion, all exhortation becomes futile. With such a man, for instance, as our young friend De Nares—poor, vain, deluded youth—there is nothing to be done except to stop one’s ears and fly, for it is sinful to stay and listen to blasphemy and profanity when no good is to be gained.

“Practically speaking, we may divide mankind into two classes—those who believe in the immortality of their individual souls, together with the doctrine that, according to our use of free-will here, we shall be happy or miserable hereafter, and those who maintain that we die like dogs.”

"The division is a very broad one," said the sick man.

"It is; but not too broad as a starting-point if we come to examine it farther. You may object that I throw the Jew, the Mahomedan, the Hindoo, all pell mell into the first category with Christians. I do so advisedly, for any of these may be led by logic, as well as grace, into the true fold—nay, if they are honestly following their lights to the best of their power, they may be charitably hoped to constitute an integral part thereof at this moment, and dying,—still in a state of darkness but good-will,—to come to eternal life."

"That is, indeed, a consoling thought."

"On the other hand, what shall we say of those who have been brought up as Christians, who feel no doubt as to its essential truth, and yet live as though this life were the only thing they were ever to know?"

"Awful as it is, I fear such has hitherto been my own case," said Clarence humbly, and much moved.

"But will be so no more," answered Latimer, with fervour. "Of that I am convinced; your tone, your very look convince me. You will never from henceforth afford the monstrous spectacle of a man living at variance with his convictions. A dead faith is, to my thinking, the most frightful possession that can belong to us; and mind, by this I do not mean a lost faith."

"There can be no doubt of it! How strange that all this comes upon me now with a new light!"

"It is the result of your having been mercifully brought face to face with death. But now, before I would begin the new edifice of your sanctification—nay, do not start at the word, my friend; it is not a matter of choice, it is a common bounden duty for all, since 'Be ye perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect,' was spoken for all men—before doing that, I say, I would make sure

of the foundation. Have you a sure and certain faith in the great truths of Christianity?"

"I can honestly say that I never remember having a single doubt as to their Divine origin. No, my faults have been many, though not of what may be termed a vulgar kind. Self-seeking, spiritual indifference—an inordinate love of the creature in lieu of the Creator—such are my failings, and Heaven knows, bad enough, too—bad enough. Ah, sir, if you only knew even now—and I have not told you all—a hatred which——"

"Hush, my young friend! I am not here to listen to your errors or your self-reproaches. Confess to God. I leave the past to time, but, under His guidance, I would give shape and form to your efforts for the future."

"And I will gratefully listen," said the invalid meekly, the sudden flame which a thought had kindled there, quickly dying out of his eyes.

"Since you believe, realize your position. Here upon earth for a few years—a very instant compared to eternity. On your behaviour during this instant hangs eternal gain or eternal loss. In what, after all, does true sanctity consist? Ah, it has been nobly defined by formula—'in doing our ordinary actions extraordinarily well.' In an honest, earnest, constant endeavour to comply with this rule, lies holiness, and not in hair shirts, self-flogging, or in fasts and vigils which jeopardize that precious boon, our health—a treasure confided to our hands by the Creator, that we may husband it for His service."

And then Mr. Latimer left him, not only because he had other strong and sick lambs who craved his tending, but because his native tact told him what so few seem to know, that enough is enough.

* * * * *

Vaia Temple had herself posted her letter as

she rode through the village after breakfast; and had ascertained that it was in time to be delivered that same day in London. She prevailed upon "the little self-affianced one," as she called her—hoping that the touch of ridicule therein conveyed might do her good service—to accompany her; but Marion never dreamt that the letter posted with such precision was addressed to Warrington.

And indeed her surprise, had she known both this fact and what the epistle contained, would have known no bounds. From her point of view, the little maiden would have deemed such an act utterly dishonourable, and we will not say but there may be many who will agree with her, even after impartially reviewing everything that has been urged in defence or extenuation of Vaia's conduct; for Marion to awake to the knowledge of her friend's fallibility would have shaken her conviction on all subjects to their foundation, and she would doubtless have exclaimed, in the misery of her bewilderment,—
"Chaos has come again!"

But of Vaia's motive in making her ride out this morning, all right-minded persons must approve; and she herself was partially consoled by this reflection as the bitter thought crossed her mind, just as she popped the momentous letter into the irrevocable jaws of the post-box,—

"Poor darling! if she only knew, how she would hate and despise me! But I love her welfare better even than her affection."

This motive was to prevent Marion from meeting De Nares any more before extracting a promise that she would allow that unprincipled youth no more "privileges" until her parents had been informed of what had passed, and their consent obtained to the continuance of the engagement—a consummation which Vaia looked upon as improbable in the extreme.

As she anticipated, she found that her words of the previous night had borne salutary fruit, and prepared the ground for such a request as she was now making to be well received.

"Certainly I will promise you that," Marion answered at once; and the young groom a hundred yards behind them, and who was already appreciative enough of female grace and loveliness to keep his eyes—as was, moreover, his duty—far oftener upon them than on "all the landscape smiling near," was quite surprised to see his two charges, as he doubtless considered them, suddenly shake hands as if about to part; and he wondered, if they took different roads, which of the two he should feel most bound—or was it most inclined—to follow.

And already the letter was speeding on its momentous way, and arrived in all safety in Curzon Street just as he it was destined for was engrossed in the absorbing task of tying his white cravat for dinner. Engrossed! And why not? Was it not said of Napoleon, that he was great in small things as in big ones? Hector would have argued that it is a mistake to do anything badly, and that to do the smallest thing well requires a moment's concentration.

Another matter which many deemed small in him was the pains he took with his little dinners; but those were not the people who dined with him. How to extract the most from all things,—the main rule of his life—here came notably into play.

As soon as his hands were free, he took up the letter.

"No, I don't know the writing," he thought.

"Ah, the Studfield paper! Whom can it be from?"

And having opened it, an unmistakable flush of pleasure suffused his well-cut features as he read the signature. He was expecting company, but

was not pressed for time, and most men and all women would instantly have satisfied their curiosity as to what the missive contained. But Hector quietly put it aside with the reflection, "No; that would be waste. In any case I could not answer it to-night, and how I shall enjoy its perusal over my nocturnal cigar, when my guests will have had the goodness to take themselves off."

A quarter of an hour later he was helping the soup, for punctuality was a rule of the house, and his guests took good care to observe it.

There were but four—Lord Farnworth, the nobleman to whom Warrington had restored the stolen "cattle" piece, an American diplomatist, formerly a *confrère* of Hector's at Vienna, whose name was Ogden, and last, not least, Lady Bagley and her daughter Constance.

"Still the same cook," said the Berkshire Earl, appreciatively sipping the soup.

"I always take everything as a compliment," said the host smiling, "that can be hoisted into one, though your remark is open to another construction."

"No, Warrington, if there is any unpleasant feeling, it is one of jealousy. I give my French ape a hundred and fifty, and yet—oh, he's well enough, but somehow things always taste better here."

"Where did you get her from?" asked Lady Bagley.

"Invented her," said the Earl. "I assure you all his cooks are equally good. Blessed if I don't believe he does most of the dishes himself."

"I must cook them in the drawing-room then, for I never was downstairs in my life," cried the accused.

"I have not been here long," said the representative of the stars and stripes, "but I had understood the custom of putting dishes upon the table to have long since exploded."

"So it has," said Lady Bagley, "except at our host's, and, strange to say, while I rejoice at the change everywhere else, I find its retention here a distinct attraction."

"Destructiveness," said Hector, "is the passport to success in this as in all the fine arts."

"Oh, the poor fine arts," said the young lady of the party. "Do you seriously call dinner-giving one of them?"

"I do, indeed. Ought I to be ashamed of myself?"

"I will first hear your defence."

"Exquisite food produces exquisite conversation. Will that do?"

"By no means. The better the dishes, the more they attract notice and monopolize conversation. To be quite frank, I consider the only fault of your dinners to be that they are too good."

"How can that be?"

"Because people are not content with eating them—they must discuss them."

"I own the force of the objection to a poetic young lady; but I think that talking too much about food is only a necessary tax for the high quality of the other conversation which sooner or later is sure to follow."

"But I am new to it all," said the American, "and want to know why you have each dish of any importance placed upon the table, where you take the trouble of carving or helping it yourself?"

"Well—with many excuses to Miss Constance here—I will explain if she will allow me."

"I allow you for this once. We must be courteous to strangers, you know."

"I consider, then," said Hector, "that a dish which is not seen, or even not seen to advantage, only does half justice to the cook, and confers but a curtailed degree of satisfaction upon the carver."

"Hear, hear!" from the Earl.

"I never have a larger party than you see to-day. For this I have many reasons, but one will suffice. Were I to attempt to help a larger number, the last served would not get his food really hot. Then I own I like carving.

"Is that another fine art?" asked Miss Bagley.

"To be sure it is—and what is more, a well-nigh lost art as well. Besides, it is a pleasure to consult individual taste."

"Well now, Hector," said Ogden, "hold on a minute. You won't mind what I say as a foreigner? Well, see here—I notice that we are having, I don't say a long, but a distinct pause between each new arrival. Is that a fault or a perfection? See, now, I am just a barbarian seeking information."

"It is neither. The inherent condition of all earthly concerns. To time such a process as the eating of five persons to a second is not practicable. Now mark this—either you must wait for the dish, or the dish must wait for you. Of two evils, take the lesser.

"My dear Lord," exclaimed Lady Bagley, "you are celebrated for novelties, but this beats everything I ever——"

"What is it?" asked everyone in a breath; and the old Berkshire epicure put up his eyeglass to scrutinize the dish with intense interest.

"This," said Warrington, "is, I admit, the latest invention of 'my own pure brain,' the fruit of long solicitude and countless failures borne, I trust, with a patient spirit."

"But what are they?" persisted the Earl.

"Why," said Hector, in a moment of complacency which rewarded him for all his labours, "they are meat ices."

CHAPTER XXV

HIS ANSWER.

THERE are two posts daily from London to Studfield, the second delivery reaching the Park about nine o'clock, at which hour the inmates, being naturally in full career of dining, are not immediately presented with their letters; but they are placed, ready sorted, on the marble slab of a gigantic table in the great hall, through which everybody has to pass on their way to the drawing-room.

Since her nephew had been pronounced out of danger, Lady Amaranth had returned to Studfield; but she drove thence every day over to Northdown and spent an hour with the convalescent, he having recently made that first grand step towards recovery—from bed to arm-chair.

It happened that on this evening Vaia's mamma reached the said marble slab before her daughter; and, as she handed the latter Hector's answer to her missive of the previous morning, she observed, "For you, dear, from Lord Warrington. I suppose to inquire about his brother. No doubt he writes to you thinking I am still at the Towers."

"Thanks, mamma," was all Vaia said.

Marion was close beside her, and, like Lady Amaranth, supposed that the contents of the letter was sure to be communicated to her.

Both were disappointed, and neither condescended to ask for information which was not volunteered.

Lady Amaranth wisely forbore, because she hoped, since the marriage she herself had planned could never be, that matrimonial projects were even now afoot

between her daughter and Warrington; while sweet Maid Marion was amply assured that if her loyal Vaia withheld aught from her, it was neither from neglect nor want of trust, but for some good and sufficient reason.

Her ladyship had not even looked at her daughter as she handed the letter. Not so Marion, who could but notice that her friend's hand shook slightly as it received this first letter from him she loved, and that the tell-tale blood rushed hotly to her cheeks.

The position was awkward enough, no doubt, but her mother-wit taught her instantly the best way to save it.

Leaving Marion for the ostensible purpose of approaching an adjacent lamp, she there and then broke open the envelope, and, just glancing as carelessly as she was able over its contents—of which, however, she scarcely read two words—said,—

“Yes, mamma dear, as you say, it is about Mr. de Nares.”

And then she thrust it into her pocket, adding, “One of us will have to answer it.”

And she was very glad when her mother replied,—“Oh, you, by all means, dear. I have letters enough of my own to answer.”

But the effect of this little comedy would all be lost, Vaia thought, if she had the weakness to make a speedy retreat in order to revel in her idol's letter in the delicious privacy of her own rooms, with the door locked. So she went and chatted to Mrs. Heatherly till the men came in from their wine and cigarettes, and even deferred the delicious moment for a full ten minutes afterwards.

By this means no one suspected there was anything special in the letter, except Lady Amaranth, and she was far from certain.

Vaia might very probably—for she had much of

Lord Warrington's remarkable self-control—have put off the coveted moment even to—

“The dead waste and middle of the night,”

but that she wanted to be able to say, in case her mother should—contrary to all expectation—ask to look at the epistle, that she had torn it up—a sacrifice indeed, but one necessary to preserve it from profane scrutiny.

Here is the letter :

“MY DEAR MISS TEMPLE,—

“If anything could tarnish the great pleasure of receiving a letter from you, it might well be the news you now give me.

“As we spoke of the subject during our stay at Studfield, I am, of course, in no degree surprised at the very unsatisfactory turn which things have taken. You are so right to have written to me at once. I must thank you heartily for this mark of confidence. I know, too, how warmly attached you are to Miss Marion, and you have taken, whatever comes of it, the only step in your power to save her from a wretched fate.

“There is, of course, something else—the exercise of all your great influence to induce her to give him up. But, judging from all I have ever heard or seen of young people in love, I fear even your charm, wisdom, and persuasiveness may be ineffectual in such a case.

“Now, as to what lies in my power to do—I mean towards preventing the marriage. I fear you will think it disappointingly little. You are, like myself, a landowner, only on a larger scale. I do not know if a young lady can realize what we men feel on the subject of an hereditary estate in this centre of all that is desirable, dear old England. Mine is entailed upon Augustus. This is eminently

right, and, I may say, indispensable. I am sorry to own that my brother is a happily rare exception among the heirs of our class. Most of us have an almost excessive solicitude for what we *call* the land, but which at least includes, if it does not solely refer to, the people upon it.

"Blood, they say, is thicker than water, and yet so strong is the feeling I am endeavouring to describe, that I believe many of us would rather see our estates go to a total stranger who would manage them worthily, than to a son whose only thought would be to dissipate the revenues, and I, for one, am of this number.

"Ah, my dear Miss Vaia, how bitter it is to know that the first time I refuse Augustus one of his unblushing applications for money, he will go to the Jews, and recklessly sell his chance of succeeding me for almost a mess of pottage.

"For the moment it seems to me that all I can do is to wait till he informs me of his intentions with regard to our dear little friend, who, I trust, does not care for him irrevocably, and then I will oppose him *tooth and nail*.

"And when are you returning to town? Soon, I hope, now I see by the papers that your cousin is getting well.

"*Mind*, I have something of the greatest importance to say when we meet. Can you guess?

"Till then, pray—if I may say so—keep me *au fait* of what goes on. In other words, any excuse will be welcome which procures me the pleasure of another letter from you.

"I remain,

"Very sincerely yours,

"WARRINGTON."

The letter was headed by the word "Private," twice heavily underlined.

Vaia heaved a long breath as she came to the end. It was not a love letter, yet she was satisfied. It contained just such a gleam of encouragement to her hopes at the end as she had vaguely told herself it might supply.

Vaia had read somewhere, "Few things are more eloquent than ill-suppressed joy," and she recalled the words now, to put a guard upon the betrayal of so sudden a rise in the thermometer of her spirits as had just taken place.

Forewarned is forearmed, and she rejoined the others and passed the evening without attracting special attention of any kind.

And Hector's letter was already ashes!

Naturally enough, Vaia began next day to sound her mother about an early return to town.

"My dear," was the reply, "as soon as ever poor Clarence can bear the journey."

"I quite understand, mamma, that you do not like leaving him at the Towers, but——"

Here she stopped, and her long eyelashes drooped.

"I mean, do you think of Clarence's remaining in London with us—as if—nothing had happened?"

"No; I have settled all that. You and he must not even meet for a considerable time."

Vaia gave so palpable a sigh of relief—in which remorse, perhaps, ought to have had a share, but had not—that Lady Amaranth looked up quickly, almost resentfully, and went on to say,—

"Mrs. Heatherly says they will be only too delighted to have you here for weeks to come; and, as Marion comes to us for part of the season, you need have no delicacy about accepting."

"But you are not returning to Park Lane without me?"

"For two nights, yes. Then we go abroad."

Though Vaia strove hard to dissemble, her annoyance at being down in the country for an in-

definite period did not escape the keen eye of her mother, who, moreover, set it down to the right cause—Vaia's anxiety to be again with Warrington.

"And how long do you think of leaving me here?"

"Do you mean from now, or from the time we start?"

Vaia said she meant from the present time.

"Well, it depends on Sir Magnum. He hopes we may set out in four or five days. I shall remain in the South of France at least a week."

It was evident that Vaia must not hope to find herself comfortably started upon her fifth London season for upwards of a fortnight to come. It provoked her sadly in her present irritable temper to notice that her mother was supremely indifferent as to whether her only child were annoyed or not. As has been sufficiently seen, Lady Amaranth had her own very fashionable way of loving her daughter, which involved almost seeming to hate her every now and again when the naughty girl deserved it.

After this not very satisfactory chat, Vaia found no difficulty in suppressing the joy with which Hector's letter had filled her.

She told herself that he might be well enough inclined to propose to her now, and yet change his mind if two or three weeks were suffered to elapse without a meeting. So far, he had in no wise committed himself, and a free man has only his inclination to consult.

Vaia was humble—singularly so in the case of an heiress—about her own personal and even mental attractions.

Report said there were several impending *débütantes*, who were bound to take society by storm this coming season. Warrington was certain to meet them. He enjoyed—as she had often heard her mother say—a *prestige* and personal influence quite out of proportion to his rent-roll, and many

a father or mother would stretch a very large point to secure such a prize—a man so utterly safe, one of themselves too—for a son-in-law.

Altogether she was very miserable, and there were undoubted grounds for her being so, since, as days passed by and she calmly reviewed the situation, she told herself again and again that, with the most ample allowance made for circumstances, Lord Warrington's bearing towards her up to the very last was hardly that of a passionate lover, even when supposed to be concealing his ardour.

Meanwhile, the affair between Augustus and Marion had entered on a new phase.

No sooner, indeed, had her friend's earnest words shaken the little maiden's faith as to her being the future wife of De Nares, than all her superabundant native modesty took alarm, and the reckless young man was astounded to find that this white dove, whom he fancied he had tamed, would no more flutter to his heart and be caressed, as on the first declaration of his passion.

In vain he twitted her with taking a mean advantage of his inability to pursue her. Sophistry and entreaty alike recoiled harmlessly from the polished armour of her maiden pride. Had he only been entreating for himself, the struggle would have cost her more; for this sweet, little, fair, gentle damsel was almost divinely tender-hearted and pitiful.

But Augustus was extremely handsome, and the innocent child made no shame of admitting to herself that she had received his hot kisses with quite as much rapture as he had showered them upon her. So if now she were hard upon him, she felt she was equally so on herself, and this made her strong.

"Now don't scold and fret," she said, one day, when he could not get her to come near where he

lay, "or you will never get well. Besides, whatever you say, I am sure in your heart you must feel that a girl who has accepted a secret engagement is bound to behave as I do."

"That I swear I don't. Come here, you little prude, and don't be a fool."

The latter part of his behest she scrupulously obeyed, but so much as a single kiss all his eloquence could not obtain.

"At least sit by my side and let me lie with your hand in mine," he pleaded.

"Oh, yes, you will pull me to you, I know."

"I swear I will do nothing of the kind."

"On your honour?"

"A thousand times yes!"

Then timidly she came and gave him her hand. He never made the pretence of keeping his promise, but pulled her roughly towards him—he was nearly well now, but had still only one arm free—and all but snatched the coveted kiss.

Marion was really alarmed—not at the kiss, but that he should think nothing of his word, and so she told him, adding—"It makes me doubt you altogether. How can I now trust you in anything if you have no honour?"

"Why," he laughed, "did you not know all was fair in love and war? 'At lovers' perjuries,' they say, 'Jove laughs!'"

"Oh, indeed! Then I dare say that applies to engagements as well!" And the tears started to her blue eyes.

"No; hang it, no. That would be unmanly—real harm, you know. There are things a feller doesn't do."

And so they sparred and wrangled on, the result being that if the young girl now and again saw gleams of her idol being made of clay, he grew more and more ardent through being thwarted.

Now though he did not know how properly to love himself, as Hector did, he was not the man to deny himself any great boon upon which he had once set his heart, even if he must needs follow the virtuous path to acquire it. So that what had begun as a whim—a mere distraction—developed, under Marion's artless but wise behaviour, into by far the most fixed and seriously pursued object which, in the space of his unworthy life, Augustus de Nares ever set himself to obtain.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOW HECTOR TAKES THE NEWS.

A FEW days after the events just recorded, Augustus de Nares arrived at his brother's house in Curzon Street, where Lord Warrington had very kindly bidden him to take up his abode—at least, for the present.

"I know, of course, we shan't get on," the latter said in a note he happened to be writing to his old friend, Lady Amaranth; "but it may put more of a check upon his thoughtless extravagance, and other of his bad habits, to find himself in so severe a temple of respectability. Besides which, after his smash-up—bodily, I mean—it would hardly look kind to put him in lodgings while I have room for him here, and another point which I am quite ready to admit is that this arrangement will cost me a good deal less than the other."

So Augustus turned up like the proverbial bad shilling, and Hector received him with the very best intention to let bygones be bygones, and try whether that ageing and sobering event, an illness which confines to bed for a certain time, had rendered his brother capable of being converted into anything like a decent member of society.

Nothing is so unfavourable to success as the belief that we shall fail, and Warrington must have been sanguine indeed if, with the past in his mind, he could now entertain much hope of reforming Augustus.

Still, he told himself, it was his duty to try.

A silk scarf, worn as a sling, was all that remained of the late accident, so far as outward testimony went.

Augustus always gave his brother the irritating impression that whatever he did for him was at best rather less than his due. Often was this promising youth heard to declare,—

"I know he hates both me and my ways, and would cut me dead, only he's afraid of what people may say."

Needless to point out how very far from the truth this statement was.

Now Hector detested squabbling in any form, and he determined that whatever happened, he would no more be betrayed, as he often had been before, into any unseemly wrangles with his brother.

But the better one knows people, the harder it is to carry this out.

During dinner but little was said, and it was not until this ill-matched pair had settled down to their cigars in two extra comfortable arm-chairs, that the junior began to unburden his mind.

When one knows what is coming, it is difficult not to be amused at the would-be artfulness of a speaker who fancies he is unfolding a completely unsuspected announcement.

"Now then, Hector," began the younger man, "I know you are dying to preach me a sermon. Begin."

"I declare I am not. I have ceased to believe in domestic sermons."

"You mean I'm beyond them, or they are beyond me. Ah, well, one can't be a boy always. I really do mean to set to work in earnest, if I can find something to do."

This was a new tone indeed.

"Glad to hear it, I'm sure. And what kind of work do you think of doing?"

"Ha! there's the question. Can you suggest anything?"

"It is quite impossible; the field is somewhat restricted, certainly. You see, you have never studied much, and so we may leave out of the question not only such posts as are competitive, but all which require the passing of an examination of any sort."

"Yes; I was never a bookworm, nor a plodder," said Augustus, with a touch of pride.

"What say you to business? I have some influence in the city."

"A desk? It would kill me in a month."

"Then there's the management of somebody's estate; but in these bad times that profession is more over-stocked than any other. Besides, that entails a lot of desk work too. You were never good at figures."

"Only as regards betting and the odds."

"The Bar?"

"Books again."

"Well, I see nothing for it but emigration. A ranch, or a sheep farm. The life is rough, but you are young and active—a good horseman."

"Fact is, Hector, I want to settle down altogether; and when I have told you why, you will see that expatriation is out of it."

"I am all attention."

"Well, then, I've always thought that I should never come to much good till I married."

Then he paused to watch the effect which this startling announcement would produce. Not detecting the slightest change in Hector's visage, he went on,—“I've been looking about for some time for the sort of girl to suit me. Now I know it isn't every girl who could manage me.”

Hector thought she would be a wonderful girl who could; but he only said,—

"Perhaps not."

"However, at last, I think I've found her."

"Well done! Money, of course."

"Not a stiver."

"Then you don't hope to be married for years! Ah, a long engagement is a thousand pities!"

"Not at all. We hope to be married at once. I tell you nothing else will steady me. Besides, a fellow has twice the courage with a lovely little wife beside him."

"But what are you going to live on?"

"Ah, well, that is just what I want to talk about."

"And who—I mean that all this time you have never told me who the lady is."

"Perhaps you can guess."

"I am bad at riddles, and would rather you told me."

"Well, it is that little Marion Heatherly."

"But she has been brought up in luxury. She would never do for a poor man's wife."

"How do you know? I tell you she worships me."

"And—what do her parents say?"

"Oh, I think they'll be all right."

"Now, Augustus—no beating about the bush. Do they know of it?"

"The thing is only just settled. My only object in not speaking to Squire Joe is that I fancied you'd expect to be told first."

Warrington did not speak for fully a minute. With one so unprincipled as his brother, he knew that remonstrance and expostulation were alike thrown away.

"And now that you have told me," he resumed presently, "are you going to write to my friend Heatherly, and say that you have secretly engaged yourself to his very young daughter, and beg his consent to your marrying upon nothing a year?"

"I'm not such a fool! No; of course I must first have something to go upon."

"And meanwhile the girl——"

"Well, she must just suffer, I suppose, as I do! But I want to know what you can do for us."

"But you declare none of the things I suggest are of any use."

"Now look here, Hector. You know it would never do to let me starve. I don't want to go into details, but, confound it all, that's out of the question."

"At present, of course, though you have run through your own money, you are very welcome to what I can afford to do for you. But suppose you don't pull up now. My means are very limited. I have only, as you know, a much mortgaged estate of no vast dimensions. When your debts amount to a sum out of all proportion to what I could pay, even if I would, what then? How much better, instead of coming to that, to act as if to-day you were dependent upon your own efforts for a livelihood."

"Well, I have thought out the whole situation. I am quite certain that a young married couple can live as cheaply, if not more so, than a single man."

"Yes, yes; but it all depends how. An impoverished pair can always live badly on less than an extravagant young bachelor, who goes on extravagantly, tossing money about, and denying himself nothing. But a single man who has the will can not only exist honourably between a bedroom and his club, on means which would be heartrending for a married couple, but if he deserves the name of a man, he will endure patiently a thousand self-imposed privations, which, while a pound remained in his pocket, he could never allow his wife to submit to."

Augustus was getting irritated, and was at no pains to conceal it. Flinging his cigar into the empty fireplace, he began to walk about.

"Of course I knew you would throw cold water upon the whole thing. You are always complaining of my wildness, and now the very first time I make an honest effort to steady myself and turn over a new leaf, you do your best to show me it is impossible."

"My dear Augustus, if you talk such nonsense as that, I don't know what to say."

"Oh, I suppose you want me to drink myself to death—the sooner, the better."

"More nonsense."

"I swear, Hector, that with your d——d calmness you are enough to drive one mad!"

"There is nothing to be done without calmness, and I wish you would show a little. I am still waiting for you to suggest some reasonable way in which I can help you."

"But will you pay for it?"

"I have not much money, but I am even prepared for that in moderation."

"Not much money! I like that."

"Explain, if you please."

"You can have as much as you please."

"I can raise a little, of course, by mortgaging my life interest."

"Rubbish! I don't mean that," said the younger brother, who was sitting upon the corner of the table, and swinging his leg to and fro.

"Now look here," said Warrington very quietly; "that makes three times you have been at the brandy bottle since dinner. You know what the doctor told you lately. It isn't that I grudge it, goodness knows; but just to disprove your charge of a moment ago, I shall have to tell Baines not to put it out another night."

"Lord, it's not worth the fuss. I don't care a curse for it," said Augustus, emptying his liqueur glass into the coal-scuttle. "They are mere thimblefuls. But about this money?"

"Well! I'm all ears."

It required all De Nares' rashness, backed by what he had drunk, to take such a liberty as he was about to do with Hector.

"That Temple girl has no end of thousands a year, and would have you to-morrow."

Warrington surrounded Vaia in his thoughts with quite a halo of reverence and poetry, and he felt it would cost him nothing at all to bound from his chair, and then and there strangle his nearest living relation. As it was, there followed a short silence, and then he said very quietly,—

"I do not say I may not some time marry; but it is going rather far to ask me to do so merely to please you, and farther still to choose my wife for me. Besides, I should not deem it fair to a rich wife to spend her money upon a relation of my own. A third point is that you are quite mistaken in supposing that Miss Temple has any regard for me beyond what she would bestow upon any old friend of her mother."

"Bosh!" cried the other, who felt bolder now that the ice was broken. "Why, I twitted *my* girl with knowing her secrets, and she turned all the colours——"

"Stop! I decline to discuss it, or to hear another word."

Hector uttered this in a tone there was no gain-saying. There was another rather awful pause, and he went on in a voice once more soft and calm,—

"I am still waiting to hear your views, Augustus; not as to the means by which I am to raise money, but as to the way in which you propose I should help you when I have got it."

The heir-presumptive had then the inconceivable hardihood to say,—

“Well, as far as merely getting the tin to start with, I suppose I could do that myself to-morrow morning by a stroke of the pen; only, of course, I should have to pay about six times as dear for it as you would.”

He did not look at his elder brother as he made this cool reference to a *post obit*, but he *felt* him, as it were, turn white with anger. Augustus fully intended it as a threat. He pursued,—

“I have always known that if I chose to go in for it with a serious eye to money alone, I could make racing pay like anything.”

“And is that all you have in view? Is it your deliberate intention to gamble—for it is nothing else—with the very last sum of money it will ever be in my power to raise for you?”

“I tell you it is a moral certainty, and that’s good enough for me. When a chap knows the ropes as I do, the least bit of luck will pull him through.”

“Indeed! I am afraid there are plenty more quite as clever at the game. May I ask if you think of marrying before or after you have made the experiment? Not that I will give one farthing towards so mad a scheme in any case.”

“Well, I think the sooner May and I are spliced, the better. But you refuse!”

“I do, indeed; and am not ashamed of it.”

“Well, then, if I go straight to the devil——”

“You will only have yourself to thank for it.”

“Then I swear that to-morrow morning I go to the Jews, and——”

Both had risen, and both were at last equally flushed with anger.

Warrington was about to beat a timely retreat

to his club and his whist, lest he should say aught that he might hereafter regret. So excited were both, that neither had heard a single knock at the front door, nor a subsequent one at the door of the room, and it was the second and louder repetition at the latter which now arrested the younger man in the middle of his insolent declaration.

On being told to come in, the faithful Baines appeared.

"Why knock, Baines?" asked the peer.

"Beg pardon, my lord," the servant faltered. He could not say, "I feared you two were quarrelling," so he said, "I thought you were busy."

"What is it?"

"Please, my lord, there's the Inspector of Police in the hall—same as come yesterday when you was out."

"Oh, very well; show him in. Augustus, would you mind taking a stroll? I know it is about your hour for smoking."

Nothing loth, De Nares for once did as he was told, and the strong arm of the law walked in.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ROBBERS AND ROBBERS.

"I'M afraid I'm disturbin' your lordship," the new-comer began as soon as they were alone, "but your man told me yesterday as you was like to be in to-night, and without wishing to alarm your lordship needless, I don't want to lose no time."

"Quite so," said Warrington; "but before proceeding farther, how am I to know that you are what you say, an Inspector of Police? Have you your warrant about you?"

The man smiled, and Hector at once felt assured. A big, burly fellow of about fifty was he, who, after beginning life as a private in the infantry, had joined the force when he had had enough of fighting, and had gradually risen to his present grade.

"I have not, my lord; but if your man will just call in the policeman upon this beat, he'll identify me; or, stay a minute, I'll fetch him in myself."

"No need, I'm quite satisfied."

"Very well, my lord; I'm glad on it;" and he looked it. "And as to that, the one outside might be a bogus article as well, uniform and all, and both of us in the plot. I've known of such a case."

"What is the object of your call?"

"Well, my lord, it's just this. There have been suspicious parties seen at night about these premises."

"Indeed! Who saw them?"

"The constable on duty. He seen them on two occasions, and reported same to station."

"Well?"

"Well, my lord, I want to see what precautions can be taken. You've a power of valuables about, it strikes me, and I don't altogether like your conservatory."

"But how came you to know? Is not this your first visit?"

"No, my lord; I was here yesterday afternoon, and your man he showed me over."

"I think he told me—yes."

"You see, our men always has particular orders to look sharp after houses next to where the builders are."

"And there is a large one to my right in course of erection. They seem an unnecessary time about it."

"It was the frost stopped 'em, as I take it. They seem to be pressing the work on now."

"How many of these suspicious persons may there have been, officer?"

"Three or four, my lord; but on the second occasion there was only one man as had come with the first lot."

"And the constable did not feel quite justified in taking any of them into custody?"

"Why, you see, my lord, it ain't exactly that: our game is not to scare 'em, but lead 'em on!"

"What, officer?" asked Hector, rather amused. He liked this talk, notwithstanding all the danger it boded, far better than his confab with Augustus. "What! incite the rogues to commit a burglary?"

"We shan't let 'em go quite as far as that, my lord. Our plan is to nab them on the attempt."

"Is not that running it rather fine?"

"Well, you see, if we fluster 'em, they're only scared away for a time."

"There's something in that!"

"While I'm here, my lord, I should like to cast my eye over that there conservatory again."

Perhaps you wouldn't mind comin' along with me. There is a lamp, but by your leave I'll take this candle. I haven't a lantern with me."

"By all means. I need not tell you that all this is properly closed at night, officer. The shutters, you see, slide in and out of the partition walls, and here are the iron bars on the inside."

"Just so, just so," said Mr. Inspector, poking about with his candle in hand—now stretching it high over his head, and anon crouching down in the attitude of the man-frog in a pantomime."

"Here," added the peer, "is the spring-bell, which my man Baines never fails to put up before retiring for the night."

"Of course you are quite sure of him—of his respectability, I mean?"

"Absolutely."

"Whew—!" went the officer, with that long, low whistle habitual to his class when making a discovery they have no reason to conceal. "Well, as I live!"

"What now, Mr. Inspector?"

"Blest if they ain't been here already."

"Indeed! How do you know?"

"See them pencil marks, my lord!"

"I see a faint smudge of some kind—yes."

"This is no accident, my lord. Sure as my name's Sam Stockton, they've been here."

"I own I don't understand."

The officer then proceeded to demonstrate that certain faint pencil marks corresponded on the outside of the clap-doors—on their wood-work, that is—with the position of the bolts and bars which defended them on the inside at night-time."

"This is really very serious," said the peer.

"Looks bad for your people," said his companion.

"Nay—I won't have a word against any of my servants," said Hector

"So sure of 'em as that, eh? No one else in the house?"

"Only my brother."

"It's uncommon strange."

"Stay—I have a clue!" exclaimed Warrington, remembering suddenly the incident of the stolen picture.

He then gave the officer a full account of the affair, telling him all about his mysterious acquaintance, the convict. "Touching that individual," he asked, "what sort of looking man was the one seen by the constable outside on both occasions? Did he give you any idea of his personal appearance?"

"He did; but, lord love yer, these cracksmen are as downy over altering their make-ups as—as play-actors very near."

"I dare say; but there is always the chance of their not having deemed it necessary to make up at all."

The officer then gave the description at second hand; but even with this drawback, the word-painting was graphic enough for Warrington to recognise without difficulty his disreputable friend, the amateur picture-dealer.

"Now, you know more about these things than I do," he said, as composedly as if it were merely a question of some flowers for his dinner-table. "What would you advise me to do?"

"Well, my lord, it's according to the expense you feels inclined to go to."

And he proceeded to explain that "parties" varied in what they deemed a reasonable amount of precaution, even after listening to the best professional advice—some holding that a special night-watchman outside the premises was guardian angel enough for anything, while nothing would satisfy other of the said "parties"—more especially if they were rich,

female, and elderly—but they must needs have at least one satellite of the force ensconced within the domicile—indeed, as near as propriety would permit to the portals of their sleeping chambers.

It transpired, indeed, that the worthy Sam Stockton combined some of the attributes of a wag with the serious discharge of his often tragic professional duties; and Hector, who loved humour above all things, was nothing loth to make a study of character which was absolutely new to him. He made the honest fellow sit down and partake of a moderate glass of whiskey and water, for Sam was over bulky to be kept upon his legs during so long an interview as this parlous question necessitated, more especially when the amount of standing he must have gone through already was taken into consideration.

Finally it was arranged that the inspector should give a special caution to the policeman on duty for to-night, and that on each succeeding one a reliable watchman should reinforce such vigilance just as darkness fell upon the street.

So Hector went off to his club and his cards, soothed and cheerful, notwithstanding his uncomfortable passage-at-arms with Augustus. He happened to be in good luck too, and experienced, considering the moderate stakes to which he invariably limited himself, a fairly prosperous couple of hours, returning home a winner of some thirty pounds, and with the pleasant conviction that skill had stood for something in the account.

“Yes,” he mused, as he slipped his latch-key into the lock; “I pity people who do not care for cards; but whom I pity still more are those who, like my friend Lady Bagley, have no club where they can always play if so inclined, and need never do so when not disposed.”

The days that succeeded to this one were un-

eventful. For at least a fortnight, nothing happened, so to speak. The Honourable Augustus, indeed, displayed an unbroken fit of the sulks, but continued nevertheless to patronize his brother's roof. Concerning his poor little *fiancée*, he wrote to her letters more full of gall than of love; and what there was of this last ingredient, hardly had the flavour—even for its travelling through the post—which the dear little girl quite realized, or even expected.

Instead of gushing gratefully to the palate of her gentle spirit, it set her thinking—like so much modern poetry, which, instead of carrying you away, makes you stop to ponder over outlandish words, strained thoughts, or foggy similes. Then whatever the young man thought of his brother—and Marion was far from certain but that Warrington might deserve much of it, notwithstanding all the infatuated Vaia might urge to the contrary—she felt there was a certain reserve and decency of form, at least, due to herself, her age, sex, and position, which the Honourable Augustus appeared to ignore. Sooth to say, his whole strain kept as near the swearing point as the writer dared, and it seemed to Marion that she could read the big, big Ds and other profane expletives quite clearly between the lines. The love too—what there was of it—was little better than the abuse of his relation. In a man who rightly or wrongly considers himself engaged, a certain amount of red hot language, and even some little familiarity may be quite to the taste of even the wonderfully nice girls to whom such things are ofttimes addressed. Vaia's sweet friend, too, was quite equal to making due allowance for a young fellow whose style was not merely devoid of every particle of literary merit, but was so utterly unformed that it was evident the writer was not to be unreasonably accused of expressing his exact meaning.

Still, the poor girl would, time and again, blush up with shame and anger, and stamp her little foot in fretful deprecation, as she perused one of these precious epistles,—taken to her own room to be the better enjoyed,—exclaiming,

“There again! Why will you write so—after all I said, too! Can you understand that I am not a barmaid?”

And big tears would positively well out from her eyes, as she crumpled up the much-bescrawled paper, adding,—

“There! I don’t love you a bit, sir; do you hear? I hate you, I do—I mean when you are rude, and—oh no, I don’t, but——” and then she would have a thorough cry, and think—“I must bear it all, and change him. Poor dear fellow, he has been so badly brought up!”

And the forgiving angel would assert itself in her once more, and Marion would sit down and indite the dearest, sweetest, most utterly futile little attempt at a sermon ever seen.

And talking of sermons, by the bye, you really did yourself deserve an awful one just now. Yes, *you*, maid Marion—your very self!

Oh, just to think the things that honourable people will do when they are in love!

You have suborned and bribed Mademoiselle, the French governess, and got her to receive De Nares’ illicit communications under cover for you, little dreaming that of all your peccadilloes—including that one grand, memorable kissing struggle, which seemed to your innocence to marry you for life to this Lothario—this is incomparably the worst; in fact, it is a real bouncing, honest, genuine sin, and nothing less! Do you hear that, miss?

The naughty little thing tried to justify herself to herself, by reflecting it would all come right when she and Augustus should be married; but

yet she dared not acquaint the righteous Vaia with this sad delinquency. She already found how different a process it is, when one comes to the point, to excuse our own conduct, and to get even the most partial judge to do so.

To do Vaia justice, she was too noble to suspect such things. All the same, this reticence—barring Marion, as it did, from discussing with her friend much of what was uppermost in her mind—proved most irksome to the little maiden.

And to judge by the said letters, this marriage, which was to crown all so gloriously, did by no manner of means appear to be progressing.

Marion always inquired what farther steps he had taken, and how soon and in what manner he intended to act, in this or that direction, for all Squire Joe's offspring had a considerable amount of the practical in their composition.

"I begin to think," he said, in one of his replies, "that we shall have to make a bolt of it after all. And I'm dashed if I don't think it's the most prudent thing we could hit on. What a royal rage the Peer would be in, eh? Gosh! I'd like to see his phiz when he heard it. The best point about giving 'em the slip, as I say, is that the old 'uns can't untie a knot once tied. Hector would have to stump up some tin then, deuce take him. I'm hanged if I can get on with that fellow! You should have heard me telling him all about it, which, according to my promise to you, I did the very day I came here. I offered to do anything in reason that he'd get me to do. Honour bright I did. He pretended—he's the wilfullest devil about—at first to be pleased, and to wish to help me; but no sooner did it come to the point, than he talked, with that beastly smirk of his, of the colonies, the bush, and all sorts of places you couldn't take a lady to."

Then followed some of the tenderness of the rough and ready kind, which Marion detested, but which, as the writer happened at the moment to be somewhat "fuddled," or "copped," to use two familiar expressions of his own, he naturally did not omit.

He concluded,—

"And when at last I laid before him a little scheme to which I have given a lot of thought, and showed him how I could easily make it answer, and keep a wife on it as well, he threw cold water upon it at once, because it entailed a little bit of forking out on his part! And he calls himself a brother!"

But when Marion inquired very pointedly in her next letter what the famous scheme consisted of, Augustus did not see fit to enlighten her, but renewed the talk about elopement, and said how, if he only had his arm round her waist at that minute, he would scrunch her up!

Touching a runaway match, Marion was not so uncompromisingly averse to it as might be hoped.

She was, indeed, one of those numerous girls who have an unreasoning regard for that highly uncomfortable proceeding.

It is no doubt associated in their minds with a fascinating amount of trustfulness; and then, it is so eminently dramatic, mysterious, and daring.

Still, the little woman always looked on both sides of things, and in her letters to De Nares took care to throw an amount of cold water on the idea, which showed him the hopelessness of getting her to do anything half so heroic for a considerable time to come, or until all more legitimate resources should successively have turned out failures.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SUSPENSE.

THE London season is in fullest swing, and most of the late guests at Studfield share in the envied privilege of acting their respective parts in that drama, which, unlike other dramas, is an ever-successful revival; and in which the same performers who make their *début* as *jeune premier* or *ingénue*, play leading business a lustrum later on, to subside at last into first and second old men, and, alas, old women too, with what little dignity and resignation they best may contrive to assume.

“On youth’s gay frolics peevishly severe;
But oh, when they were young, what days they were!”

No time this for recruiting, resting, or preparation. The remainder of the year for sowing, watering, and so forth—this is the harvest, and whatever your age or infirmities, such remnant of vitality as still lurks within you must be squeezed out. Existence at high pressure is the order alike of day and night.

One peculiar feature in the social circle is, however, wanting. That noun of number, the Heatherly family, is absent for the first time. They have let their house to a fashionable tallow-chandler, owing to the badness of the times.

But dainty little Marion, most spoilt of girls, is in Park Lane with her friend, and by some miracle or other, the old people are still unaware of her entanglement with Augustus de Nares.

Lady Amaranth has for more than a week been

back from Provence, where she had safely deposited her precious Clarence. If truth must be told, her ladyship is not quite so delighted with the result of Sir Magnum's famous prescription as she at first expected to be. Of course it is an unspeakable blessing that her nephew should have recovered, and that his convalescence should not have left him a broken-hearted man. For all this no one could be more gratefully delighted than her ladyship. Nevertheless, it was provoking to find what she might well enough have foreseen—that with such an extremist as Hood, moderation of sentiment was not to be looked for, and that either he would turn a deaf ear to Mr. Latimer's terribly real view of things spiritual, or else start violently upon a religious flight, wherein no one could catch or keep pace with him, and which would soon leave his very leader far in the rear.

"Where would he stop?" had become his aunt's constant solicitude.

He was such a difficult man to satisfy, and there was no saying but that this new-born enthusiasm before long might lead him within the gates of Rome, nay, even at La Trappe itself.

Before they parted, the grateful nephew had made sundry vigorous attempts to shake his relation into the same kind of awakening which he himself had so lately experienced.

While flattered at his solicitude, however, Lady Amaranth had not considered herself in any need of this amateur apostle's guidance.

She sweetly but firmly intimated, though of course in no such flippant terms, that her spiritual state was "nicely, thank you," and declined altogether to start a Mayfair revival, convert her temple of worldliness into a chapel of howling, or exchange her refined associates for an unwashed crowd of male and female salvationists.

Needless to say, she left the young man anything but satisfied with his aunt's state. Her conscience was, he feared, too comfortably wrapped up in the swansdown of fashion, ease and prosperity; and he consoled himself as best he could by reflecting how constantly he might still prod at her sparkling plumage with the sharp pike of his written eloquence right through the gilded bars of her distant cage.

Meanwhile, there he was safe enough for the present, and Lady Amaranth, with all her love, had plenty of other things just now wherewith to occupy alike her mind and energies.

She was intensely curious to see how the little drama between Warrington and her daughter would develop and end. She told herself that it was now no less than his bounden duty to come forward.

Unlike Vaia herself, she scorned to fear any rival for the prize of Hector's hand—in female form, that is. No; if, on consideration—having now had time for cool reflection—he showed a desire to hang back from the chains of Hymen, it was liberty, unlimited clubs, *la dame de pique*, and Havanas when he pleased, which, this experienced London mother told herself, would be responsible for the mischief.

But the pair, meanwhile, seemed on the best of terms and understandings, and Lady Amaranth contented herself with affording them every opportunity of being together.

Warrington was evidently nothing loth, and besides dining in Park Lane every few days—now with company, now without—he was daily to be seen riding by Miss Temple's side in the Row; and if they had a box at the Opera or elsewhere, his lordship was pretty safe to drop in for at least some part of the evening. So that it soon came to pass that society—that most sapient, clear-sighted, and well-informed of monsters—knew quite well that it was sure to be a match, long before the contracting parties

themselves, or anybody belonging to them, were aware of anything of the kind—just as society often knows all the dreadful details of far less innocent transactions months before they really occur, and sometimes even when they are not destined to occur at all.

“How about to-morrow?” Warrington asked of his fair companion one day as they were parting after their ride. Miss Bagley—not the least jealous—was, on this as on most other occasions, the tactful *chaperone*.

“Do you mean in the evening?” replied the fair Vaia, who, of course, saw nothing peculiar in the question.

“N—no. Did I not hear your mother say yesterday she was going to the Academy without you, and meant to lunch out?”

“So she did.”

“And would it be very shocking if I came to share in your midday repast?”

“Oh, not in the least,” said Vaia, blushing now, but only with pleasure. “Marion will be there!”

“Of course,” said Hector, pulling at his moustache—a habit with reflecting men; and perceiving that Constance Bagley’s young horse had suddenly grown unaccountably restive, and that she was apparently engrossed in teaching him to have no will of his own, he bent towards Vaia, and said very low, “The fact is, I want to see you alone to-morrow—about something—rather important—I mean very—to me, at least.”

Vaia thereupon nearly fell off her horse with delight, making sure that next day he would tell her he loved her.

With a great effort, and looking, he thought, surpassingly beautiful—though deadly pale—she mastered her emotion, and said, with a wretched attempt at indifference, “Very well; there will be time enough after luncheon.”

And so they parted for the day, Hector being engaged to dine with the Foreign Secretary in full state.

"Oh, what a fool I am!" was Vaia's almost immediate mental exclamation as she saw him disappear down Great Stanhope Street. "Ten to one it is only about his brother and May! and he must have seen my mistake in my paleness and confusion, and for aught I know is laughing at me now!"

This mood lasted all the short way home, and half through changing into afternoon dress. Then it occurred to her—"But that tone! That hushed, serious, tender tone—is that compatible with mere brotherly anxiety?"

She hoped not, and yet—oh, how afraid we are to believe what we too ardently wish!

And in such alternations she passed the day.

Yet after all there was a disappointment in store for her, concerning what was to pass at this momentous interview; still, like most things mundane, it was not in the least of a kind she could have anticipated.

For the life of her she could not refrain from confiding her state of mind to her darling May, who, be it remembered, had told her so much that she was forbidden to tell.

That night the friends had one of their grand talkee-talkees, and both enjoyed it intensely.

"This time to-morrow," said Marion, clasping her hands, "we shall both be wiser, shan't we?"

"You will; for he probably has something definite to say about your marriage."

"Hypocrite!" returned Marion. "You know very well that, if he touches on the matter at all, it will be at your instigation, and after his own fate has been settled between you."

"I shall never get you seriously to believe, then, that I will not help you in this business, although willing enough, as you know, to befriend you in any other conceivable way."

"Vaia! Not when you are yourself learning what it is to win or lose the only man you ever cared for. But stay, I have a letter here from Augustus I have been hiding all the morning. It may throw some light on the matter."

But of course it did not, and proved no better than its predecessors, being twaddling enough.

Since his notable interview with his brother, young De Nares cannot be said to have improved.

He had within him that fatal propensity of young fellows booked for "the bad," the love of being surrounded and toadied by men of inferior social position to his own. What with protracted sojourns in outlandish parts, and what with his connection with the steeplechase turf, his friends, or those who aspired to that title, were indeed a crew as motley as numerous.

In the case of a great many of them, he was the only "swell" they knew. They always spoke of him as—"My friend, the Honourable Augustus de Nares," and "aired" him before their less fortunate acquaintances with unflagging persistency. They dressed after him, patronized his pet oaths, ate his dinners, and "fooled him to the top of his bent."

Augustus, albeit that he frequently treated these devoted fellows like dogs, delighted in their degrading adulation. It was an atmosphere which suited him exactly, and in which he breathed so freely as to find an almost daily increasing difficulty in existing in, or rather tolerating, any other.

It was a *clique* in which, needless to remark, strong liquors flowed freely. Many of these gentlemen, too, were acquainted with ladies who—well, who did not visit Lady Amaranth Temple. Equally unnecessary it is to mention that money, save upon rare and spasmodic occasions, was conspicuous only by its absence.

Still, Augustus had never hitherto made the per-

sonal acquaintance of poverty, save for short spells; and as she is a dame well-nigh impossible to know thoroughly by hearsay alone, that may account for the reckless way in which he was willing to expose his lady-love to a life of vicissitude and privation.

Another small point which may be pleaded in his favour is, that he never lent money. Foolish as he was, he was not fool enough for that, and his would-be borrowers, though they cursed him behind his back, secretly respected him for this piece of inconsistency.

"Confound him!" said one of these; "he's never so drunk as to lend you a fiver."

Notwithstanding this one gleam of sanity, Augustus had been steadily going down-hill ever since his arrival from Studfield, and the more so as all traces of his late accident gradually disappeared. Like so many more, he mistook what was merely the wonderful recuperative power of youth for an abnormally strong constitution, and he loved to boast of a frame of iron. So that no sooner had he recovered from his fall, than he deliberately set about taxing his *physique*—which, in reality, was not nearly so robust as his elder brother's—in every conceivable way, and indeed to so absurd an extent, that even he was fairly scared by the apparition which met his haggard gaze when confronting his looking-glass o' mornings; these latter being generally noons, and sometimes even afternoons.

"Hullo, old chappie!" he exclaimed, on one of these uncomfortable occasions; "this sort of thing don't pay! *Mille diables*, but I don't look like a lover at all!"

This was just before Marion Heatherly arrived in Park Lane. He had promised himself the prize of this fair girl, and had still sense enough to know he was scarcely going the way to win her. So he pulled up short, and—

"He threw off his friends like a huntsman his pack ;
For he knew when he would he could whistle them
back."

He had some visiting cards printed, and left them on everybody he knew, and on some he did not, but with whom—though he said nothing to Hector about it—he was aware his brother stood well.

He visited his tailor and other skilful deckers of the outward man, and seemed really to have turned over a new leaf. Most wonderful of all, on the first Sunday after their return, the three ladies encountered the "Buddhist" at church.

To be sure, for other reasons, the change came none too soon. If Warrington was doing his best to preserve his treasures from burglars, he was equally determined to run no useless risks of having them burnt, to say nothing of the possibility of a certain peer of the realm being himself consumed in the holocaust.

It happened one night that Warrington, returning at about one o'clock from his club, discovered his nearest relation sprawling upon the staircase, too inebriated to rise, and having dropped his lighted candle, which was still burning, in a position to make any householder's blood run cold.

On this suspicious occasion, too, the promising youth's latch-key had been left in the door—a gentle way of breaking to Hector what might be expected on the other side.

The consequence of this was a brief note on the following morning, moderate in the extreme, but much to the point, acquainting the Honourable Augustus de Nares that the slightest recurrence of anything of the kind would be visited by instant and irrevocable expulsion.

Once only had Lady Amaranth invited them to dinner together. Nothing particular occurred, but

it needed not a tithe of her quickness and practised tact to determine never again to attempt the experiment.

The next and only other time he had dined in Park Lane was one night when Marion had gone to some theatre with the Bagleys. This was not accidental. Lady Amaranth had quickly seen that the pair were lovers, although she had no suspicion of matters having gone to such length as was really the case.

"I will have nothing to do with such an absurd boy and girl flirtation as that," she had said to Vaia.

"I hope not!" replied her daughter, and added vehemently, "But I think, mamma, you need not fear. It is too absurd ever to come to anything. Neither of them has a penny."

"I am so very glad. No doubt you know a good deal more about it which you are not at liberty to reveal. Oh, do not answer. I never want to hear secrets, only, being very delicately placed with so young a girl under my charge, I should be so unhappy for her parents' sake and my own if any such awkward complication had arisen. You have quite relieved my mind."

CHAPTER XXIX.

SOMETHING HAPPENS AT LAST.

WHEN Lord Warrington, according to appointment, sat down to luncheon with the two girls, none of the trio experienced even the slightest constraint or awkwardness. However momentous might prove the outcome of this day—however acute the interest, the anxiety working in their several brains, these three goodly persons were too well born, and had been of late in too intimate and constant intercourse, for any perceptible *gêne* or visible pre-occupation of mind to assert itself.

Vaia was a shade paler—her eyes had a sparkle more of light in them than usual, while Hector seemed to take a shade less pleasure in the mellow sound of his own voice than was his wont—that was all.

Yet it was a great crisis for Miss Temple—in truth, the only intense moment her young life had ever known.

But such crises, when foreseen, have a way of bringing with them the needed supply of desperate calmness and strength.

Marion had far less at stake, and accordingly looked and felt much as usual.

This young lady had gradually lost her prejudice against Hector, notwithstanding all that her lover had said and written to try and increase it.

Indeed, this singular man had a fashion all his own of making his way with your heart and sympathies in spite of your head. Not only had Marion never outwardly resented his uncompromis-

ing hostility to her marriage, but she was too honest to deny that she was never thrown into the company of Vaia's hero without keenly enjoying his great if indefinable charm.

Vaia's hero! Yes, there was no doubt immense weight in that bare fact, especially for a young girl so wrapped up as was this one in her only female friend, and that friend a woman of Vaia's parts and character.

But all the same, there was nothing peculiar in Marion's appreciation of this still young nobleman.

The secret of his power, no doubt, lay in the fact of his intense, unparalleled happiness. He united, in a degree hardly ever met with, a mind thoroughly at peace—firmly believing as he did that all things are for the best in this best of all possible worlds—with an even brightness of spirits, and a phenomenal appreciation of all things, that was positively contagious in its exuberant intensity.

Those few who disliked him—and excessively—were the very gloomy, the cold, and the narrow-minded. Such persons being themselves in love with melancholy, either could or would not follow him an inch on earth, or consent to be raised by him even that short distance from it. He never hated them back again, but deeply and sincerely felt for them.

Marion had heard the adage that "men in love eat little," and to-day she watched my lord to see what augury might be drawn from his appetite or the want of it; and she had to come to the conclusion that if *he* were in love, either the proverb was false, or he constituted an exception thereunto.

Though never a large eater, he did fair justice to the light and artistic repast which Lady Amaranth's clever young French cook sent up.

However, in half an hour all was over, and five minutes later Hector and Miss Temple found themselves in the front drawing-room alone.

She had naturally entered first—he closed the door.

She strolled to the window and pulled up a blind.

“Shall I do that for you?” he said.

“Thanks, it is done. I do not think little Marion is looking her best, Lord Warrington, and it worries me. What think you?”

“A little pale, perhaps, but not ill. The heat, nothing more. Miss Temple, I want to speak to you.”

“Yes; I am quite ready.” And as she replied and took a seat, she

“Smiled in her anguish, for fear she should weep.”

“I want you to know,” he began; “but it is very difficult.”

“Let me help you.”

“Help me!” he rejoined, in unfeigned surprise.

“Yes; it is about your brother and Marion, is it not?”

“And why—when I see you so often—should I ask for a private interview to speak of them?”

She was delighted at this, and showed it clearly as she answered—“Then what can it be?”

“Miss Temple, what I have to say to you regards the happiness of both our lives. It is of you and me I mean to speak, and of no brother or friend, or any one in the wide world besides.”

“I think I understand you,” she said, looking down, but with no affected modesty. “Only why did you say it was so difficult?”

“I was right; for, twist it how I may—word it in what terms I please—my first utterance must sound like an impertinence.”

She looked up at him now amazed.

After a moment she said—"I do not think I shall consider it so."

"That is right, for none is intended. Your assurance is an enormous comfort to me. Be as indulgent as you can, for the announcement, though in itself hopelessly impertinent, is justified by a noble excuse—honour compels me to make it. I will be as utterly frank with you as you must promise to be with me."

"Yes, that will be best," said Vaia.

She now knew she was about to hear something regrettable, and trembled for the happiness so nearly grasped.

"I may be wrong, but it seems to me I have no other course." Here he sighed, as in dire perplexity. "It is a most unusual one, I feel; but then, so are the circumstances."

"Well?"

"There is something against me as a suitor; I am going to tell you what it is, and, as you have already guessed, I am going to implore you to marry me in spite of it."

"If you love me, there can be——"

But he stopped her.

"Nay, hear me out. I am bound to prevent your uttering any word which, if you decline to give me your hand, you will wish unspoken."

"You are very honourable."

"Very, I hope."

"Then I will say at once that I can overlook anything but dishonour."

"Be not too sure."

"But since you love me ——"

"And if I do not?"

She started, then told herself this was only an ill-timed joke. She turned and looked at him. He was serious to sadness.

"I feared you would be angry," he said, low and dejectedly.

In a moment she had mastered her emotion sufficiently to say—

"Lord Warrington, I am a rich woman. If any other man on earth made me an offer of marriage without caring for me, it would be for my fortune; and therefore the last thing he would say would be that he did not love me."

He nodded his head.

"Now nothing shall make me believe that your object is money."

"You are quite right. I want money to enable my wife to keep up her position, it is true; but in your case, it is the last thing I think of. Had I a couple of thousand a year more of my own, you are the woman I should pick out from the world of all I have ever known."

"But why—why if?"

"If I do not love you? Miss Temple, the name of love is often given to feelings which cannot compare with what I feel for you."

"Then if you care so much for me, what does it matter about terms?"

"Because I know very well that what I feel for you, strong as it is, is not what many women would be willing to accept as a substitute for love. Let us suppose I said nothing about it,—which would be far more civil and more usual,—in course of time you would make the discovery, and probably consider yourself swindled."

"I think so, and very justly."

"That is what I would guard against."

"Tell me two things—what do you understand by love? and what is this other strong feeling you say you entertain for me, and which is so distinct from it?"

"I think I can define both very clearly and in

few words. Love I take to be—for mind, I have never felt it, and there are plenty more just like me, if they would own the truth—an eminently personal feeling. Once kindled, it never quits the individual who first inspired it. Beauty, health, wealth, temper, even character, may all go, but love remains only strengthened and purified by the loss of all that was a comfort to the loser.”

“Such love as that is very rare.”

“None other deserves the name.”

“I agree there, and it is quite my own idea of love.”

“I own I have never either felt nor been able to understand it, although I know it exists, and can partially describe it.”

“You think then that no man should tell a woman he loves her unless he feels for her all that a devoted mother feels for her child.”

“Certainly I do; but I go much farther. He must super-add to the constancy, the personality, and self-sacrifice of the highest maternal or paternal affection, all the admiration and mere passion, which in themselves are no more love than hate, and yet without which the nobler, calmer sentiment is incomplete, and can never be either true love or so much as a tolerable substitute for it.”

“Tell me,” said Vaia, intensely interested now, although she had not yet recovered from the cruel shock she had received, “how can you be certain that one who depicts true love so nobly—more so indeed than I have ever heard it done before—may not some day feel it?”

“But I am not. Surely you would not believe me were I to say anything so absurd! What should I go upon? Because I have lived in the world for thirty-two years without falling under Cupid’s thralldom, therefore am I to jump to the conclusion I shall never love? And I would here

point out the double danger which you will have to brave if you consent to a marriage either with me or with any one like me. A man who has never loved is liable to the disease at any time, so that you have the double risk of being unhappy because he does not love you, or more miserable still, because he becomes by-and-by enamoured of another woman."

"I beg your pardon, Lord Warrington, but may I inquire—are you proposing to me?"

"Most certainly I am. Now, Miss Temple, I would ask you—are you accepting me?"

Both laughed at this ere Vaia replied—

"Oh, I shouldn't wonder; but, dear! it is all so unlike what one ever expected!"

"Life is all surprises."

"I think, please, I will come to no decision until I hear what this other 'strong thing' is which you say you *can* offer me."

"Appreciation. I think you not only the most lovely, the most interesting, the most charming of women, but I feel certain—whatever they may tell you—no others will ever feel all this half so intensely as I do."

"That is very nice! Do you not think you might call all that by a prettier name?"

"It would not be honest. I like—or, let us say, adore—you for a whole catalogue of things, of which you may be said to be the binding. But I tell you plainly that if you lost your various attributes one by one, so in proportion would my worship decline. 'Thou' is a word I either misunderstand, or else all the rest of the world are wrong about it. 'Thou' means a collection, as far as I can see, of mental, moral, physical, and fortuitous qualities, gifts, and possessions. Take some of these away, and you may or may not continue to adore your 'thou'; but common sense

tells me that of course 'thou' is no longer there; 'thou' has become somebody else."

"I think I see your view, and I cannot deny that there seems at first sight to be something in it. You mean that you ought not to be charged with inconstancy, because it is not you who have changed, but the 'thou,' as you so funnily call it."

"That is exactly what I mean. I could not have stated it better."

"But if one does not change by one's own fault—say one simply loses one's looks with time—do you pretend that such a transformation on the part of a wife—which, moreover, we must all come to—dispenses a husband from continuing to cherish her?"

"By no means."

"Then what security would a woman have in marrying a man like you that he should not some day say to himself, 'I swore to love and cherish a young and pretty woman; my wife has ceased to be either, so I can now do as I please'?"

"The case occurs every day, and those husbands who have bragged the most of the eternity of their devotion, are just those who soonest emancipate themselves under some such absurd plea as you describe. But, my dear Miss Vaia, with me you would be quite safe; and, I think, all argument apart, you feel it. Marriage is many things, but, above all, a contract. No honest man ever breaks one of these, either with a woman or with any one else."

"I think I may believe you."

"And are you going to accept me? Come, I am dying to know."

"I am really afraid—that I am."

"Angel!" said Hector, and he took her in his arms.

"Dear me!" she said, "you are very like a lover!"

"Oh, nothing of the kind—an appreciator, believe me, nothing more."

"Remember, sir, if you ever dare to *love* any one else, I—oh, I shall kill both her and you."

"Oh, no, you won't!"

"I tell you I will. But you will not—tell me so. Tell me, I implore."

"I cannot."

"But why?"

"Because I think it quite possible I may in the course of time."

"And yet you dare to stand here kissing me!"

"Why not?"

She made a movement to leave him, and repeated her threat. He shook his head.

"I tell you——" she began again.

"Hush! First ask why I say you will spare our lives."

"Well, why?"

"I promise nothing, mind."

"You don't, indeed!"

"But I have a shrewd guess that *if* I ever later on, fall in love—mind I only say *if*——"

"Go on, go on."

"Well, Vaia, sweet, sweet Vaia—I guess that it will be with *you*."

This made her so happy that she almost forgot her trouble, her grand disappointment.

"And do you really love me?" he said presently.

"I mean, on the great old lines we have been talking of?"

For all response she hid her face upon his breast.

"And when did it begin—when did you first begin?"

She looked up smiling, but there were tears in her dark eyes.

"I never dreamt you were so curious."

"Hector! Mind, you are to call me Hector now."

"Am I? Some peeresses call their lords by their titles."

"Yes; I don't like it. Say Hector directly when I tell you."

"Well, I declare you can give orders if you cannot give love."

"They are much more important, and—well won't you obey?"

"Hector," and she hid her face again in the same place.

"I also ordered you to tell me when you first
——"

"Must I?"

"You must."

"It was, I think, from the time I first saw you."

"But you loved your cousin before."

"Never!"

"How? You were engaged to him."

"I did not know what love was then—not till——"

"Well?"

"Till you taught me."

CHAPTER XXX.

WHAT THE WORLD SAID.

SOCIETY detests to discover that a match has been plotted and settled under its very nose, so to speak, without that nose having smelt a rat, as it is vulgarly expressed. It cares no jot how many imaginary rats it thinks it smells; but a veritable rodent to dare to exist without society having whiff or sniff of its presence is an offence to its dignity, and an imputation against its *flaire*.

Per contra, it smiles—it beams upon an alliance which it has seen hatching, and of which it has confidently foretold the issue. So that the news of a projected marriage between Lord Warrington and Miss Temple was received with universal pleasure and congratulations.

“Such a nice match!”

“So suitable in every way.”

“They will be the handsomest couple in London.”

Then some who were by no means displeased, but who despised any speech which was too purely laudatory, intervened with—

“He wanted money so badly.”

“Oh, yes, very beautiful, no doubt; but she has been out a good many years.”

“She is just in time to save him from becoming a useless, clubby, wicked bachelor.”

But altogether, they may be said to receive a large proportion of the benediction of the world.

To be sure Lady Snappfield was heard to declare “that Vaia Temple—she knew for a fact—had

jilted her cousin Clarence in the most heartless way"—the Temples happened to have dropped her for some years at this period—"that the poor young man was dying in a sort of private asylum somewhere in Italy, and that, for her part, she wondered how Lady Amaranth's daughter was not afraid to lie down at night and go to sleep, much less to say her prayers."

But then her ladyship's strictures had lost much of their pristine pungency, partly by repetition and partly by inaccuracy.

The duchesses—and Lady Amaranth knew them all—were far more pleasant about it, which was of very different importance to what a Snappfield might think or say. To be sure they could better afford to be delightful over the good fortune of their friends. Why, it was notorious that poor Lady Snappfield had only two live duchesses on her entire list, and one of these was a dowager; besides, they only asked her to their big things, though she always spoke of them with the most familiar affection.

But what Lady Amaranth, to do her justice, was most anxious about of all, was how her still dearest Clarence might take the tidings.

Was hope really so dead within him as to leave no fear that the announcement of her daughter's positive engagement to Warrington would be certain not to cause a relapse? It was best to write to him at once, as nothing would be more dangerous than for the poor young man to read it for himself in some English newspaper. It ought to be broken to him by degrees, but how?

Useful little Marion Heatherly was then called into requisition, and she wrote to Mr. Hood the following letter, not dictated, but in part suggested by Lady Amaranth:—

"DEAR MR. HOOD,—

"We are all anxiously waiting to hear from you again, having been kept now a somewhat unusual space (for you) without a letter. We trust that the gain of strength and general improvement you reported in your last letter are fully maintained.

"Dear Lady Amaranth desires me to send you these few lines, being unusually busy just now. The season is at its fullest. I am sure you are glad to be out of all the turmoil; and really, the weather is so hot, I rather envy your exemption from the crowded ball-rooms, where London men are expected to take the exercise of an athlete in an atmosphere only fit for stokers and salamanders.

"Vaia does not seem to feel it so much. She is out riding now with Lord Warrington. We are so glad you find such deep interest in those great projects of charity and piety to which you so modestly refer in your last.

"Do you know all you said set me thinking a great deal, and in a way I never did before. I now feel sometimes as though peace, to say nothing of happiness, were only attainable in a life dedicated to the welfare of the many.

"Perhaps this, for me, very novel feeling comes from my present circumstances. With so much to make me contented and grateful, I have terrible personal troubles of my own to bear. Perhaps you may guess at least to what subject I refer. I must not tell you more; but, oh, do pray for me—for me and for *some one else*.

"Dear me! I had no idea of entering on this when I sat down, but I have such trust in you, and—well, there are other reasons.

"Then I know how religious you are, and that is why I ask your prayers.

"I am afraid this is a gloomy letter, and coming from so gay and bright a spot.

"Yes, Lord Warrington is always with Vaia now, and I do not get nearly so much of her society as I used. Some day it will be a match.

"I must really end this long letter. Good-bye, and write soon—not to me please, but to your aunt, who, of course, expects it; besides, I would not have you refer to what I say of myself, so it would not be much good, would it?

"Very sincerely yours,

"MARION HEATHERLY."

So that when a few days later Clarence read in the *Morning Post* the marriage in high life in question, beginning with the usual, "We are authorized to announce, et cetera," he had already received the main intelligence it imparted forty-eight hours beforehand.

Perhaps, after all, so much precaution was hardly necessary. He had already entered upon that phase of the neophyte's life, wherein every trial wears for him the garb of a blessing, every earthly joy or pleasure the warning red signal of danger. This usually becomes modified later on, when the young zealot's fire grows tempered with discretion, and he has been taught that all the innocent enjoyments of life are not the necessary monopoly, as are its forbidden ones, of the dissolute and impious. He then begins to see the awful responsibility good people incur when they make holiness appear a martyrdom in the eyes of those who are weak of flesh, infirm of purpose, but who would still wish to be better than they are, if not scared away by the prospect of sacrifices which they do not deem themselves heroic enough to make.

As for Augustus de Nares, he was delighted at his brother marrying so large a fortune, and persisted, with his habitual bad taste, in concentrating his remarks upon that one aspect of the affair, to the intense disgust of the noble benedict.

Being in one of his most reckless moods, and slightly fortified with alcohol in honour of the engagement, he kept prodding away unmercifully at his elder all through luncheon on the morrow of the proposal, the news of which he had just heard from Marion; for, sooth to say, my lord had not yet condescended to make the slightest reference to the subject in his limited intercourse with his junior.

To make matters worse, Count de Turgy happened to be present.

Augustus had been walking in a sequestered part of the park with "his girl," as he called Marion, the meeting being probably far less accidental than the young lady's maid, who made it proper, was supposed to believe.

"I say, Count," he began, "*ce cher* Hector has done a good stroke for himself, eh?"

"I am charmed, quite charmed at the marriage," said the Frenchman, with well-bred evasion. "Miss Temple is the most sweet, the most nobly attractive, of all your *gracieuses* English women."

"Oh, bother all that. It is the pieces I'm thinking of—her gold, man."

"Do not say that, for 'tis the smallest of her attractions." Then, turning to Warrington, whose brow looked menacing, "He knows that, my dear Warrington, as well as we, but the dear boy will always *plaisanter*."

"Luckily for him," said Hector, "I will put that construction upon his foolish words in deference to your presence, Count."

But tact and conciliation were alike thrown away upon a brutish nature bent on insolence.

"I swear I'm not joking an atom," he said. "He's done the cleverest trick of his life, and in a devilish sly manner. I saw it weeks ago, but, d—n it, when I chaffed him, he vowed there was

nothing in it; and though it was all settled yesterday, about this time of day, he never splits on the subject at breakfast this morning, but preaches a long sermon on economy."

"Well, you are a young prodigal, you know. Remember, a brother must do the mentor sometimes. Delicious this *homard à l'Américaine*, Warrington. Some more Steinberger, please."

But Augustus resented having been what he called hoodwinked, and now declined to be extinguished. He was in the humour for a row and courted one. If the Count was a spectator all, the better. His brother would be the more enraged. He pursued,—

"Not that *I* care what he does or what he tells me—not I. What is marriage now-a-days but, nine times out of ten, a mere bargain? This Temple girl, I suppose, wants a coronet. You pawn her yours, and she gives you something to gild it with, and——"

"Augustus!" thundered Hector, not losing his self-control, but well aware how useless it is to speak low to a half-tipsy man; "dare to say one word more about Miss Temple, and out of this room you go."

"*Allons, allons, mes amis!*" expostulated the Count.

Half cowed, for Augustus had sense enough to have a deep esteem for his elder brother, he was too vain to obey instantly in De Turgy's presence.

"I only say she is like all the rest," he muttered.

Hector rose.

"By God!" he said, "another word, and Baines, the servant, shall help me to carry you to your room, if you are too drunk to walk there. It won't be the first time, you know."

"Oh, that's right; tell tales out of school, do," said Marion's admirer. "If you think it such a

blessed privilege to sit here, I don't. I'm off to my club."

Herewith he rose, and, with a defiant "Ta-ta, Hector, good-day, Count," he swaggered off.

"A sad thorn in your side, I fear," said the Frenchman.

"A thorn, my dear Count, which my side totally declines to entertain any longer," responded his host.

* * * * *

Four days later, Lady Amaranth received the anxiously awaited letter from France.

"MY DEAREST AUNT,—

"Pray thank dear Miss Marion for writing to me, but much more for having done so in the kind and friendly way she did. The news of my cousin Vaia's engagement, which it foreshadowed, reached me as a positive fact in yesterday's *Morning Post*.

"You will be surprised, perhaps, at my alacrity in wishing them joy—her and Warrington—and even doubt, naturally enough, the sincerity and heartiness of my words. Still, believe that if I could speak instead of write them, you would, I am convinced, feel quite sure how utterly I mean what I now say through the cold impassible medium of the post.

"From my very heart I am glad. From my soul I pray God to shower upon them both His choicest blessings—more especially those spiritual ones without which all others are so much worse than vain. As I pen this, I ask myself, in wonder, if I am indeed the same being, who, a few short weeks ago imagined—— But, my dear aunt, *you know to what I refer*. Oh, what a wretched mole in the dark earth is a man when he blindly thinks he knows what is best for his happiness! Since that illness

of mine—so mercifully sent—I can indeed exclaim with Wolsey, ‘I feel my heart new opened.’

“Thank Heaven, I am now intent on higher things, and all worldly matters are dwarfed beyond what I can describe. I daresay periods of dryness and discouragement will follow. I am, I trust, prepared for that, and shall be supported through it by the remembrance of this season of special light, grace, and happiness.

“My love to Cousin Vaia, and my other, my new, Cousin Hector.

“I remain, my dearest Aunt,

“Your ever affectionate Nephew,

“CLARENCE HOOD.”

From Studfield came a full chorus of best wishes, from the deep bass of Squire Joe to the childish treble of the infant nursery.

These were particularly welcome to Vaia in her great happiness, bringing as they did a gust of new-mown hay, meadow-sweet, and wild flowers generally along with them.

“Oh, see here, Hector,” she laughed, as she re-read the letter for his benefit, “here is a tiny post-script inside the envelope I hadn’t seen before: ‘Peachie says she is sorry, but she means to marry Lord Warrington when he’s *a widow*.’”

CHAPTER XXXI.

LADY AMARANTH IS ANGRY.

LADY AMARANTH TEMPLE was hardly at an age when the receipt of a flaming love-letter can be looked upon as an ordinary event.

Her ladyship's still very handsome and dignified countenance was, therefore, a sight to behold as, on going through a packet of notes which awaited her return from an afternoon drive, her eyes encountered the initial line,—

“My own, darling duckie,”—

“Surely for one of the servant maids,” was her first thought.

The letter was in a man's hand, and a very bad one. Four pages of closely written paper. She glanced at the signature, and gave a very palpable gasp.

“Yours, more awfully spooney than ever,
“Guss.”

Is this a hoax, some miserable trick of that horrid Lady Snappfield? No; audacity has its limits after all. A mistake? Yes, that is it, no doubt!

She refers to the envelope.

“Miss Marion Heatherly.”

“Oho!” and something about still waters occurs rather unjustly to her mind.

“This, then, is the little minx's gratitude! to cover her benefactress with obloquy by carrying on a vulgar and clandestine love affair under her (Lady Amaranth's) sacred roof! So much for being

bothered with other people's children! Oh, the young hussy!"

And in the first flush of her indignation the British matron even thought,—

"Who knows how far matters may not have gone?"

Then, like a knife in her bosom, came the suspicion that her own daughter was in the plot.

"Making a fool of me, too!" She rang the bell.

"A pretty pass things had come too, indeed! Where were those girls?"

The groom of the chambers appeared.

"Where are the young ladies?"

"Miss Temple is out riding, m' lady, with his lordship."

"And Miss Heatherly?"

"She have gone for a walk with her own maid, m' lady."

"And, Powles, why do you not sort the letters properly? I have had to speak about it before. I have just opened, by mistake, one addressed to Miss Heatherly."

Powles, the most irreproachable of men, save only in his parts of speech, was conscience-stricken. Under the plea of training rather a raw young footman, he was guilty now and then of getting the said novice to save him a lot of trouble, and to add considerably to his own hours of leisure and repose. The old story,—

"Very sorry, m' lady. It shall not occur again."

Powles was a servant of too high a stamp to make the farther mistake of entering into explanations. Had he done so, he would have been cut short, besides creating the bad impression of putting blame on an inferior.

Not doing so, he was questioned—always an advantage.

"I suppose," said his mistress, "you left it to Martin?"

"Yes, m' lady."

"I must tell you again, Powles, that that is not the way to teach anybody. When I asked you to teach that young man, I meant that whatever he learnt was to be under your own eye."

"Yes, m' lady."

"Yes; but you don't do it. The papers this morning were disgracefully ironed."

"They was done shocking, m' lady. I'll tell Martin of it soon as I seen 'im, m' lady."

"There was one part of Mr. Gladstone's speech so blurred and confused that I could not even make out his meaning."

Lady Amaranth had no suspicion that her very words had been applied to the said oratorical effort by more than one of those who had heard that adroit politician deliver it.

"Yes, m' lady."

To what would Powles not have assented, "Yes, m' lady"? We believe he often said it in his sleep.

"And, Powles, will you say that I desire to see Miss Temple the moment she comes in?"

The inevitable reply.

The injunction meant that, should he not be in the way when she came home, her maid was also to be primed with the message.

This tiny discussion gave Lady Amaranth's anger a little time to cool. Many ladies under the peculiar circumstances would have deemed it quite allowable, if not incumbent upon them, to have read the said love-letter from end to end; for was not Lady Amaranth, for the time being, in the position of a parent or guardian?

But when her eyes had fallen upon the "Guss" at the end, she recognised the scrawl of which she had previously seen one or two specimens.

She wished to be able to say that she had not

read the precious composition; and so, being an eminently truthful woman, she had no alternative but to crush any slight curiosity which the novelty of her discovery might have given birth to.

This proud woman loved her pride far above any of her other passions, which preference, if not exactly a virtue, was certainly a blessing.

She was fond of her little friend Marion—most people were; fond, too, of her parents and belongings down at Studfield; and, moreover, sensitively tenacious about retaining their regard. It is only nobodies who think it fine to affect indifference as to the opinion of others.

Yes, poor Lady Amaranth was shocked, pained, uneasy, though her anger was gradually subsiding; or, to put it more correctly, it was leaving the innocent girl, to weigh more heavily upon the man who could have so led her astray.

In the midst of her reverie—if so sweet a term can be applied to a very matter-of-fact, even cross, state of mind—the courtly Sir Magnum was announced.

Now a great physician should never pay non-professional calls. He does not dare; for if he has the time, it would never do to admit the fact.

Sir Magnum's fame, however, has arrived at such a pitch, that he is like Her Grace of Epsom Downs, in the "Merry Duchess," who herself informs us that—

"A Duchess can do as she pleases."

Yet, even with him, Lady Amaranth is the exception which proves the rule.

Besides, he has such an interesting piece of news. Lord Northdown marries a foreign semi-royalty, a German personally known to the Temples.

"There is a hitch, however," he adds. "Our most noble friend—although his Marquisate is one

of the oldest — cannot prove his sixteen quarterings!”

“Dear! how unfortunate!” sympathizes her ladyship quite seriously, for she is *au fait* alike of Teutonic life and ideas. “Where does he break down?”

“Grandmother (maternal).”

“Dear, dear; but she was a Courtenay.”

“Quite so; but her mother was a Scroggins. Now La Scroggins, although she brought gold and brains, which each, in a different manner, preserved the family into which she had married from separate causes of extinction that threatened it, was yet devoid, it is feared, of any heraldic existence whatever. In blood, she was nowhere.”

“How very sad! What will be done?”

“Why, probably it will end by her resigning herself to being looked down on by all her *compatriotes*.”

“Poor thing, poor thing! To be sure it will not matter much over here.”

“Not in the faintest. And what is rather absurd is, that all Northdown’s people are furious on their side at his marrying so low.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, you see, no one would have said much, but all the fuss this cerulean ultramarine—or whatever her precious highness-ship may be—is getting up, has caused some of the Marquis’ people to make inconvenient inquiries about this Prussian swell’s belongings.”

“Well?”

“And it turns out that one of her uncles is a music master at Stutgard, and she has a brother a practising dentist in America.”

“Ah; now I remember to have heard something of the kind. Still, it is quite right to work for your bread when as poor as the Von Schesingers,

and I don't see why it should make them less exacting as to the quarterings."

At this moment Vaia entered the room, all radiant with love and exercise. It is her first meeting with Sir Magnum since her engagement has been made public. The physician has known and tended her since babyhood to the present day, and he now makes no scruple of touching her white, low forehead with reverent lips, as he says,—

"My dearest child—sweet Miss Vaia, of all your old friends none rejoices at the good news more heartily than I;" and hereon the drops actually stand in his eyes.

"Thanks, thanks, dear Sir Magnum," she murmurs, pleased and moved on her side by his emotion. She feels very much inclined to salute him on both cheeks, as was her wont when little; but, alas! the world has its inexorable laws for those who aspire to be of it, and these refer to quarterings and kisses alike.

"Ah, my dear young lady, you will have been married to my friend Warrington for years before you find out fully what a prize you have won; and you will never to the last have any idea of what you escape in not wedding with nine out of ten of other men — as men go. We doctors witness many domestic scenes, are often consulted where the body is not in question, are told many appalling secrets, and divine others. Suffice it for you to know, that of all who give you joy, I am probably alone in knowing to what extent you are to be congratulated."

Vaia could not speak for a moment or two, and when she recovered her self-possession, the portly visitor had left the room.

Her mother quite felt the incongruity of intruding upon so sweet a mood as the *fiancée* was then attuned to, by reference to a vulgar love-letter. It was, therefore, with regret that she said,—

"My dear Vaia, I am sorry to remind you at such a moment that life cannot for any of us be made up only of pleasant things. I have, while you were riding, opened a letter not directed to me, but negligently placed among mine by the servants."

It was not surprise which she now read upon Vaia's face, but anxiety, clear and undisguised—one might almost say consternation.

"A letter?"

"Oh, I haven't read it. The direction and signature were enough for me; and I could not help seeing in what terms the young lady is addressed."

Vaia was silent, her eyes cast down.

"I see you know something of this. I am teaching you nothing when I say that it is written by Mr. de Nares to Marion."

"I feared so."

"Feared! Vaia, why have you not told me of this?"

She hesitated a moment, then came and sat by her mother, her whole bearing almost deprecatory in its unusual humility, and said,—

"Dearest mother, I do not wonder that you are very angry with me."

"I am, indeed."

"But indeed, all I knew was told me in strict confidence."

Lady Amaranth smiled coldly and bitterly. Presently she said,—

"It is amusing, I must say, to observe people's notions of honour. It is not honourable to give one's own mother the slightest hint or warning that may preserve her good name and the respect of her oldest friends; but to connive at a base and secret plot, a flirtation carried on beneath her roof, which ought to be sacred——"

"Oh, mamma, mamma!" cried Vaia, bursting

into tears. "Don't! pray don't! I cannot bear such words. Besides, there is such a difference between the two courses you describe. One is to do an act one's loyalty must shrink from; the other merely to leave undone—to postpone to——"

But her mother cut her short with this terrible question,—

"Pray, have you spoken to Lord Warrington on the subject?"

This was too crushing. With a mighty effort, however, poor Vaia owned the truth.

"Yes," was all she could articulate.

"I thought so! And pray, did you obtain special leave so to do?"

"No."

"You see how right I am. Honour is a convenient bugbear—nothing more."

"It was honour made me write to him."

"Oh, you wrote it! This scandal has been going on some time, I see. And may I ask—I mean if you can tell me with honour," she added ironically—"what his lordship thinks about the matter?"

"What we all think. He deplores, and will do nothing to forward, such a marriage."

Lady Amaranth knew that she had so tremendous a case against both the girls, Vaia's tears and whole bearing were so abject, that she felt she could afford to take her triumph somewhat moderately. Still she said, but in a voice which had lost some of its acerbity,—

"And so you have been fostering a flirtation—a secret engagement—here in your mother's house—with doubtless all its dalliance and dangerous familiarities, its revolting shifts of secrecy and deceit, although you had the sense not only to disapprove, but were even fully convinced all the time that a marriage between the pair could never take place."

"Mamma, forgive me. Your words make me feel I have been very, very wrong. I can say no more. Indeed, indeed, I have done my very utmost to dissuade poor dear May, but in vain. She seems quite blind or callous to all the young man's faults. Hector has again and again threatened to tell you if I would not; but I always begged it might be put off for Marion's sake. Hector, however, compelled me to tell her that his brother was most unworthy of her love, and—well in other ways unsatisfactory."

"Well, well, it is some comfort that Warrington knew of it, and played, as he always does, a wise and proper part."

"And now, mamma, how about poor May? You will speak to her, of course?"

"Can you ask? She must choose between renouncing this folly at once, or being packed off to Studfield."

"That would be very sad."

"Her own doing. She can stay here if she likes on parole, as prisoners of war call it."

"She has not come in, has she?"

"Probably not. They are no doubt in Kensington Gardens or the Regent's Park, making love among the nursemaids and their soldiers! Ugh! It is too disgusting to think of. She won't come in till the last moment. By the bye, very likely not then, for she does not dine with us at the Duke's."

"Poor, dear little May!"

"Oh that is right! You are longing to stand up for her still, I see. But I ought not to wonder. A clever woman—and, at least, I am no fool—should never be astonished twice over at the conduct of the same person."

"How do you mean?"

"Must I be more explicit? Oh you have done

well enough for yourself, I own; but in your quiet throwing over of poor Clarence, with all its consequences—in breaking your solemn word——”

“Mamma!”

“Let me finish. I say that principle was conspicuously ignored.”

“Mother!”

“Well, what? Can you deny it? I am strictly confining myself to facts.”

Goaded beyond endurance—for whatever may be thought of her, honour was still Vaia's god, and it was precisely the truth of these charges which lent them all their venom—she broke out,—

“And this is your revenge!”

And as she said this, she walked from her mother's side and prepared to leave the room.

“That is a word no dutiful child ever hurls at a parent.”

And her ladyship rose likewise.

“I cannot help it. Your feeling is too plain. You cannot bear that the course, good or evil, which I have taken in spite of your wishes and your plans, should lead to such happiness as I have found, so you must poison my joy with these needless drops of gall!”

For once in her life Lady Amaranth was in a towering passion—not subdued or hidden, such as we have before witnessed, but outward, avowed, demonstrative.

As soon as she could get breath enough to speak, she began,—

“Insolent!”

But at that moment the door was briskly opened, and Marion—all pants and blushes—burst into the room.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ON THE RACK

IF a nation is in danger of attack from some powerful enemy, the most fortunate thing which can happen to it is that war should break out between the would-be aggressor and another country.

Poor, plucky, fragile little Marion was in luck's way this afternoon, since, on making her rather brusque irruption, she found the vials of Lady Amaranth's wrath diverted from their premeditated descent upon her own fluffy curly head into the dismal gulf of civil war.

Truth to say—as is often the case in quarrels—both mother and daughter had, for the time being, entirely forgotten the original bone of contention, and their young and erring friend had passed clean out of their minds.

It is a well known fact, however, that if you attempt to disturb a gentleman of the lower orders while absorbed in the perhaps necessary castigation of the partner of his bosom, for, say, getting intoxicated more than three separate times within the same week, you will run a great risk of diverting, not only his blows, but the wife's claws, and—well, benedictions — towards your own goodly person.

In like manner, even as Marion stood open-mouthed and startled at the unwonted aspect borne by her two high-bred friends, and hesitating whether or no to beat a precipitate retreat, Lady Amaranth Temple, whose wrath had had its wicked will of her daughter in the main, recovered

herself as only a *grande dame* can, and said, in an almost normal voice,—

“Vaia, will you go upstairs and change your habit, please. I wish to speak to Marion.”

The injunction, so civilly given, was, of course, obeyed; and May, putting two and two together in her smart little brain, began to suspect that her friend of friends had been somehow getting herself into hot water through the share she had borne in her love affair.

No sooner did she conceive this theory of the position, than the staunch little soul inwardly resolved to take all the blame, however weighty, upon her own slight shoulders, and defend her *alter ego* tooth and nail.

“Come here, child, and sit down, will you?” began her sometime patroness, fumbling the while in her pocket. “I have to apologise to you for opening a letter addressed to you, in your absence; but as you will have also to ask my pardon for a far more serious offence, we may proceed at once to the pith of the matter.”

She then briefly described the servant's mistake, and, holding out De Nares' letter, added,—

“This is intended for you, I believe.”

When our doubtful deeds are brought to light, how all the little scaffolding of excuse and palliations, which looked to us so admirable while they were undiscovered, totters and falls to the ground!

“Yes,” said the girl with burning cheeks. More than half her shame, however, was at the thought of this high and mighty benefactress having seen what foolish terms of love, what pigeon English, her lover's epistle contained. She longed to ask if the letter had been read through. Lady Amaranth read her face like a book.

“No,” she said; “if that is your anxiety, I have not read it.”

There was a sigh of unmistakable relief.

"So," pursued she, "you have engaged yourself to this young scamp!"

"Lady Amaranth!"

And Marion jumped to her feet.

"Oh, very well; sit down again, please. I must not call things by their proper names, I see. Marion, you have behaved very badly—yes, and you have far too much sense not to see it. You have dragged my own daughter into a league to deceive me, and compromised me perhaps irredeemably with your parents. I have always tried to be kind to you."

"Oh, you have, indeed. Do not, pray, think me ungrateful."

"But that is just what I do think you, and always shall."

"Do let me speak," she insisted.

"Marion, I think I have the right to be heard first. After all the harm is done, what use to dwell upon it? The important thing is the future. Now, one of two things must happen: either this folly must end at once, or I shall have to send you back to Studfield. I need hardly add that I prefer the former course."

"But, dear Lady Amaranth, surely there is a third and far preferable course open to you—to write to papa and mamma, tell them that Augustus and I love each other—I do not think it will surprise them at all—and wait to hear what they say."

"No, Marion; your absurd preference for this misguided young man carries you away. In the first place, there is not the remotest chance of their consenting to a marriage between you. In the second, even if they entertained the idea, I would have nothing to do with it, and I tell you plainly you should not remain an hour beneath my care while the engagement lasted."

This was explicit indeed. The young girl's eyes

fell upon the fingers which she sat twisting in her lap.

After a silence, she said very low, but distinctly,—

“I will not give him up.”

“Then you go by the mail to-night.”

This was dire. No more meetings sweeter still for being stolen! To see him no more for weeks—perhaps years! His very letters—those slipshod, uneducated, but very red-hot letters which had become, as it were, her daily *pabulum*—would henceforth be shut off with a vigilance to check mate the astutest French governess.

At this juncture Lord Warrington was announced.

Marion, being in the sort of plight which catches at straws, instantly asked herself if it were possible he could help her. Ay, even he, the arch-opponent to her marriage. She greeted him then with her best smile—a very choice article indeed.

“Warrington,” said Lady Amaranth, plunging at once in *medias res*; “I want you to give it roundly to both these naughty girls.”

And there was at once a charm, a picturesqueness in her whole air born solely from the presence of a man.

“But I only see one,” said he, with that peculiar innocence which shone so oddly through his not innocent character.

Another man would have palpably made a joke of it.

In as few words as she could, his impending mother-in-law placed Hector *au fait*.

During her statement he kept glancing as often as might be at poor little May's face, whereon consternation sat most uncomfortably enthroned—she the while appealing to him out of her sweet blue eyes, with an earnestness as unreasoning as that of some trapped and tortured fawn.

Hector felt a distinct lump in his throat. It was ineffably touching that this helpless maiden should so plead, after the character she must have had of him from his ungracious brother.

It was to her he spoke as Lady Amaranth concluded her say.

"Dearest Miss Marion," he said, "you make me almost wish that the only condition under which you could be indulged was about to happen—the destruction of the world in a week's time; or shall we risk saying a fortnight? Hardly, I fear. Well—if the last day were next Wednesday, I would say, Marry Augustus de Nares, the magnificent—I allude to his looks—to-morrow morning. Spend a hundred, two hundred pounds a day—what you will, in fact—for you will never pay, and I hope—mind, I should even for that brief span be far from certain—and I hope he will make you a decent husband."

"You hear, dear child."

"I am like a doctor consulted about some interesting patient of whom he is very fond."

"And who is fond of him," put in Marion, with that diplomacy innate in women.

He bowed.

"The patient is tormented by hunger, and piteously clamours to be fed. But the doctor knows that food in this case is poison—indulgence, simply murder, for it can only act as food to the fever."

"Beautifully put," says Lady Amaranth. "You see, Marion, there is no middle course. It is as I have said—you must choose between the alternatives I offered you."

"Then I must go," said Marion; and the tears ran uncontrolled down her cheeks.

"Go! where?" asked Lord Warrington.

Marion came over and stood close to, and facing him, the tears still unchecked, unwiped away.

There was something quite deliciously childlike

in the candour of her anguish. She reminded him of Peachie, as she said—

“Lady Amaranth told me before you came I must either be sent back to mamma and papa to-night, or else solemnly promise to give him up.”

Hector rubbed his brow with his left hand reflectively.

“I only ask you,” said her ladyship, “if I can do less?”

“Well,” he answered, “I quite see your difficulty.”

Then he paused a second or two, and added—

“Still, I cannot but admire the dear little lady’s misdirected loyalty; also I cannot bear the idea of her being packed off. Vaia will be in despair.”

“I am sorry to say Vaia deserves to be punished as well, for having all along helped to deceive me.”

“My queen can do no wrong,” pleaded the benedict gallantly; “and even if she could, you can hardly expect me to allow her to be chastised.”

“That reminds me to tell you, Warrington, that I do trust you don’t mean to spoil Vaia.”

“And I think I should be a brute if I did not.”

“You will ruin her, and then she will be unhappy.”

“I’m afraid I mean to risk it,” he responded smiling, but in profound earnest.

Marion began to think it was time their attention should return to her, and said—

“Vaia will take a great deal of spoiling, I should think. Meanwhile, can you do nothing for *me*? You have known of the affair a long time. Augustus said he had told you the very day he came to town, and therefore *you* cannot complain of being kept in the dark.”

“By the bye,” said Lady Amaranth, “may I ask you why I have been so systematically subjected to that process, eh, Marion?”

But before the distressed damsel could answer her, Lady Amaranth turned to Hector with—

“If you have known it all this time, why did you not speak to me of it? Am I to consider you a conspirator too?”

“But I made sure you knew of it.”

“How should I?”

“I naturally supposed Miss Heatherly had told you.”

“Ah! you always think too well of everybody. I declare you are enough to cure one of Christian charity.”

“Nay! that were impossible.”

“Why so?”

“Because I never knew a genuine case of it.”

“Witty, but severe.”

This was lost upon Marion.

The very young seldom care for humour. To be sure, poor girl, this was not a fair moment in which to judge her, engrossed as she was in what she thought to be the turning point in her life.

“I have frequently discussed the whole matter with Vaia,” said Warrington. “By the bye, am I not to see her?”

“I thought,” said Vaia’s mother, “that you had been riding together.”

“Oh! that was ages ago,” cried her *fiancé*; “an hour and a half at least.”

“As I told you, she is a very naughty girl; spoke to me—— but there, I won’t tell tales out of school; only send for her—I will not. Still, I have no objection to your doing so.”

He sprang towards the bell.

“Oh! do let me fetch her,” says Marion.

“Very well,” assents the mistress of the house; “and mind you say that her lord and master wants her.”

“And all this time,” she pursues, when the two

are alone, "we have got no promise whatever from Marion. It is getting near dressing-time, and—yes, I was wrong to let her go, for when these two girls get together, they will talk for an hour."

But the speaker had either never known such love as Vaia's, or had long since forgotten what it was like.

Scarce were the words out of her mouth when the two young ladies entered, arms about each other, as is the habit of girl friends.

The tell-tale rings of weeping were quite as visible upon Miss Temple's face as upon the other's; and her bridegroom elect felt smitten to the heart by the sight of them, while the strong tide of his passion boiled up the more hotly.

"Come, Warrington," said the mother, "tell her to ask my pardon. She will do it to please you."

"Nay," he replied, "I am sure she will do it to please *you*, if you really wish it. Mothers are such privileged persons, there is no humiliation in yielding them even more than their due."

Vaia was delighted at this rather wilful speech; and as she read in her lover's eyes that he wished Lady Amaranth's caprice given in to, she went up to her parent, and saying, "Forgive me, mamma," got kissed, and made her peace.

Then came her greater reward in a whispered "angel" from her future lord as she sought his side, and they went to the other end of the room for a brief but delicious chat.

Meanwhile, Marion was telling her hostess how real a relief it was to her that all deceit and subterfuge were at an end, and how bitterly these had lain upon her candour and her gratitude.

To all this Lady Amaranth listened coldly enough.

"Then why had you so little confidence in me?" she asked.

"Augustus—Mr. de Nares, I mean—implored me to keep our engagement secret for a time. He said our happiness—our marriage—depended upon my doing so."

It was not that the poor child wanted to shirk the blame and put it upon her lover, but she could not endure the thought of her benefactress, as she chose to call her, deeming her ungrateful.

And presently Warrington came up and propounded a compromise, which he and Vaia had "evolved from their inner consciousness" as philosophers say.

In lieu of giving him up, Miss Heatherly was duly bound over to keep estranged from De Nares as long as she remained under Lady Amaranth's roof.

She was to write to him once to that effect; and she gave her word of honour that, though she might read subsequent communications from her lover, she would neither write to nor meet him any more for the present.

Moreover, her parents were immediately to be put *au courant* of everything that had taken place; and accordingly peace and harmony once more resumed their sway over the goodly house in Park Lane.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

DOWN HILL.

AUGUSTUS DE NARES' *morale* was not likely to be improved by the letter he received from Marion Heatherly on the day following the events just narrated.

The little belligerent had obtained the grace from the existing powers that this her last missive should be inspected by no one.

It was worded as follows :

“DEAREST GUSS,—

He had strictly forbidden her to call him Augustus.

“This is a terrible letter for you to receive from me, but I assure you it is more awful still to write it. All is discovered. Lady Amaranth opened your letter by mistake, the servants carelessly placing it among several of her own. She did not read it (it was the one you said yesterday you were surprised I had not received before coming out to meet you, saying I was to be at the trysting place earlier if I could), but the first line and the signature were quite enough to open her sharp eyes. Well, Vaia got into awful trouble through it, and the storm transferred itself to me when I got home. I was very near being sent off to Studfield by last night's mail. Lady A. would hear of nothing else, unless I swore to give you up for ever, which, of course, I would not do. I believe I should have found myself by this time between papa and mamma, both making my poor life a burden to me—bless their loving

hearts all the same! for, you know, I am their spoilt daughter,—only, who should arrive upon the field of battle but your brother! He was awfully kind and nice—yes, I don't mind what you say, sir, he *was*—and he succeeded in getting me a compromise. Oh! it is a very hard one, but not as bad as promising to give you up.

“I am to write you this one letter, and I have given my solemn word I will send you no more, and that I will not meet you again, nor speak to you if I do meet you accidentally, during my stay under this roof.

“Now, I'm afraid you will break out furiously, and, I'm afraid, swear fearfully on hearing all this; but I entreat you to pause and recollect that Studfield was the only alternative. I have stipulated, too, that I am to receive your letters openly, and no one is to see them but me; that is, unless I choose to show bits of them to Vaia.

“To say truth, I was surprised Lady A. consented to this; but I think your brother must have told her—I think I heard him whispering something of the sort—that you would soon tire of writing to a statue who made no sign, would cease to do so, and then I should be offended.

“I must confess I think the Opposition have not behaved so badly, all things considered. We may still hope to catch a glimpse of each other in the Park. You can easily guess or find out what balls Lady A. is most likely to take me to. We are asked to nearly all. I suppose they will let us dance in moderation—I mean together. Anyhow, you must ask me.

“It is quite unnecessary for me to tell you how vain are their hopes that anything will ever change my heart, or how certain I am that you will be true to me.

“I am so frightened that this sad news will make

you have recourse to that horrid brandy. Believe me, that can never help you. Do not be angry at my saying this. It is my love for you that makes me. Two or three times of late you have confessed to me that—but there, I have not the heart to say more.

“With much love, yours for ever,

“MARION HEATHERLY.

“P.S.—I am not crying now, but I shed such buckets yesterday, I don’t seem to have any tears left. I write as ungloomily as I can, only that I may not depress you more than can be helped.”

It will be seen from the above that Augustus’ good resolution on the score of strong waters had already begun to break down. Not that he had again been tipsy, or even near it; but the fatal nipping had been resumed, if in a modified form. He had told Marion that his brother’s refusal to consent to their union, and continued neglect to give him any substantial help worthy the name, drove him to this form of consolation. That in the bright future, when she should be the sunshine of his days, nothing of the kind would be requisite; and it is possible he believed what he said, for drinking is not unfrequently the shyest of vices, and both men and women will lie even to themselves, and to any extent, rather than admit the fearful debasement of body and mind to which they have fallen.

Accordingly Augustus, in his reply to Marion’s letter, assured her that her fears upon that head were quite exaggerated, but that he would not fail to bear her warning in mind. He went on to say he thought she had done the best she could, but hoped she would not forget the well-known proverb, “All’s fair in love and war”; that a word of honour was only supposed to be binding upon a man; and, moreover, that hers had been extracted from her

unfairly and under compulsion—her duty to her affianced husband authorizing her to do whatever averted a total separation between them.

Happily the staunch little maiden had received the breeding and education of a well-born English-woman, and was quite proof against these and countless other sophistries with which her very latitudinarian adorer strove to warp and beguile her innocent healthy young mind.

“For Virtue, as it never will be wooed,
Though Evil court it in a shape of Heaven;
So Vice, though to a radiant angel linked,
Will sate itself amid celestial joys
To feed on garbage.”

When, however, he discovered—which he did soon enough—that he might as well try to shake the Tower of London as this delicate child’s integrity, his vexation and disgust scarcely knew bounds. He allowed himself to write abusively, to menace, to insult.

It was all very well for him to fume and rage at not seeing or hearing from her, but when he proceeded to bully and almost threaten her for keeping her given word unsmirched, it was another story. Rudeness and brutality were what this damsel of gentle blood had never encountered, and the poor child was at times so sorely exercised at her lover’s violent language and sheer vulgarity, that she almost prayed he had penned the obnoxious words “under the influence,” as it is called.

“It’s all d——d fine,” he wrote, “priding yourself on doing right. I tell you it’s a beastly shame leaving me out in the cold in defiance of my express orders. When an honest woman has pledged her word to a man, she’s bound to obey him as much as after marriage. I’m d——d sick of the whole humbugging nonsense, and you’ll just

drive me to something desperate. I've a good mind to shoot you through the head, and blow my own brains out after. You may sneer, but I see such cases often enough in the papers, and deuced sensible conduct it seems to me, too. If I can't get you here, we'll go to the other world together, if there is one; and if there isn't, why, it don't matter."

But finding all such arguments produced no effect, he took another line. A few days later he wrote:

"In the letter which you said must be your last, you appeared very anxious to save me from going to the dogs; yet now you are doing your very best to drive me there! Drink? Yes, I *do*, and thank my stars that I have still that comforting friend to turn to when every one else abandons me. But that is a woman's idea of honour! Such rot! as if you couldn't get your maid to write me all you want."

He tried writing to the Abigail too, but that young person had received "a nice dressing," as she called it, from her ladyship, who had indeed been "most roused" with her. The girl had likewise been reported at headquarters, so that it was more than her place was worth—a very comfortable one, too—to give ear to either bribes or blandishments in the cause of distressed love, a subject to which, in the abstract, she was intensely devoted.

For the first week or so after the separation Guss went to such balls and parties as he could all in a minute obtain cards for, and even to one or two crowded entertainments of the kind whither he had not been invited at all.

If he knew his brother had a card, that was enough. Should an inquisitive hostess request to know to what she was indebted for the honour of his presence, he would say—should Warrington be there—that the latter had brought him; while, if he had not come, De Nares would coolly state that

his senior had sent him to make excuses, and would follow if he could.

But he failed to encounter Marion at any of these grand parties, the fact being that she was for the time knocked up, partly by the heat and more by the agitation she had passed through; and a slight attack of simple fever intervening, Sir Magnum condemned her to a brief period of imprisonment without hard labour; or, as Lady Amaranth put it, "she was a first-class misdemeanant, and must suffer durance vile in consequence."

Twice or thrice the young man saw the Temples in the distance, but, with all his swagger and the alcohol he carried, he yet stood in too great awe of Lady Amaranth's anger to approach; and as Vaia only left her side on the arm of her partners, a bare greeting *en passant* was all he could obtain from her, guessing, and rightly, that should he venture to solicit a dance, Vaia would inform him without ceremony that she was under her mother's orders not to accept.

It thus befel that after a lapse of some ten days, Marion's irritable lover made the not very original remark in the smoking-room of a second-rate club, that "Society was all a blooming bore!" and went on to explain, with the aid of many terms and phrases, — semi-seafaring, semi-bushranging, — that he intended to be "shot of the whole rotten concern"; and he did this with the unconscious tone of one who fancies society will tremble in its white satin and patent leather shoes at the fell tidings, and perhaps send a deputation to his feet, imploring him to relent; whereby he made himself not a little ridiculous in the eyes of even those damaged dandies and other good-for-nothings among whom this contemptuous young noble had just condescended to return.

But although he drank a little deeper every day,

and especially every night, and played high at games he did not understand, right into the small hours, it must not be supposed that he had by any means given Marion up. In his secret soul he respected her for being so honourable as he found her; and he had such unlimited confidence in her truth, that her silence did not in the least lead him to fancy her love had cooled. He of course well knew that she had only to ask for permission to write and break with him entirely, to receive it.

No news, therefore, was in this case good news.

Still, patience was hardly one of his few redeeming qualities. Everything in human nature goes in waves. If cards and drink had it all their own way with him four days in the week, Marion resumed her unenviable sway upon the other three.

It was during one of these comparatively lucid intervals that he addressed to his *inamorata* the following appeal, which at least contained an element of novelty.

“MARION,—

“I have reached such a depth of wretchedness and despair, that I feel my brain will give way if I have the strain much longer. Oh! do not fear that I am going, this time, to ask you to break any promise. You yourself say you only bound yourself while under Lady Amaranth’s roof. Well, I now ask you to leave it—not to meet me and return there, but to meet me and fly.

“Plenty of honest folk—ay, and swells too—have sloped—eloped, bolted, or whatever you please to call it—before our time, and in it. Besides, are we not driven to it? I swear to God—don’t be shocked; I am quite serious—that it’s the only way you can save me body and soul.

“Forgive all I have written before. I am an erring man, but one your love can yet redeem.

"You surely will not be my curse by refusing to do now what I beg, and, by every right I have over you, to *command*.

"Probably you will not fancy yourself free to answer, even by a line, this last appeal.

"Be it so. I take your assent for granted. I will send a line by a trusty messenger on Thursday night at eleven. Have all in readiness, and follow him.

"If servants are about the hall, say there is a lady in a carriage waiting to speak to you.

"Should the man return to where I am waiting with word that there is no answer, I solemnly swear, that—well, you will never see or hear again of your

"Loving, but most unhappy,
"G."

The letter, committed to the vulgar agency of the post, reached its destination on the following morning, and was handed to Marion just as she was about to quit her bed.

Now, although by this time she may be said to have recovered from her slight attack of illness, this epistle was the very thing most likely to cause a relapse.

And Thursday! Why, that was the day after to-morrow!

The first result of this uncomfortable missive was that poor Marion felt she could not get up for at least some hours—perhaps not at all.

Wearily she flung herself back upon the pillows, the letter crushed in the little white hand which lay outside the coverlet.

A knock!

"Do not disturb me just yet, please."

"It is not your maid," says a well-loved voice.

"Oh, Vaia, darling, come in, of course! Why should you knock?"

"Another letter, I see," says Vaia, as, having

entered, she stoops down to kiss her favourite.
"Bother them! say I."

"The worst is, that this time I cannot tell you about it."

"Why, may one ask?"

"Because—because the secret is not mine to give away."

"My sweetest child, you will never be happy while you refrain from giving that man his final *congé*."

"Perhaps."

"Then do it. It will spare you both a world of misery. Own now that he is not what you thought him."

"I do own it—to *you*. But, Vaia, listen: I loved him first for my own sake; I love him now for his. I look upon myself in a sense as his wife—for have I not promised to be so? And you yourself have often said, when we see our duty plainly before us, no one's word should be strong enough to turn us away from doing it."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PREPARING FOR FLIGHT.

AUGUSTUS DE NARES had that powerful faculty for believing what he wished which is common to all gamblers. He therefore settled in his own mind that when he should send his note to Marion on the Thursday night, as announced in his letter on Tuesday, it would find her cloaked and ready for flight, albeit that he did not doubt but that this very decided measure would be preceded by a considerable amount of hesitation, compunction, and suffering.

He might certainly plead that in urging the young girl to so undesirable a cutting of their Gordian knot, his own game had grown so desperate as to leave him no other course—none, that is, short of emigration or its equivalent in repulsiveness. Now let him but make the plunge irretrievable, let him bind this infatuated girl to his side for ever by the bonds of marriage, and the trick was done, and a future of ease secured to himself, if not to her.

“It is all very fine for Hector to talk beforehand. Once wedded, he and Vaia and Lady Amaranth must, for their own sakes, conspire to whitewash the offender,—a process in which the old birds at Studfield would perforce be compelled, willy-nilly, to join. A trial for abduction! Very like a whale! Why, the scandal would dim all the *éclat* of the Warrington-Temple nuptials! and the Warrington-Temple purse must, *coûte qui coûte*, pay so much black-mail as will avert the danger.”

Truth to say, his lordship's heir-presumptive had very soon learnt from those amiable instructors, the Jews, that he presumed too much in expecting any substantial or prolonged aid from that money-breeding fraternity. At first, indeed, he had been graciously received. A virgin signature is as attractive to the Israelite as a young Circassian straight from home to the wily slave-merchant.

They swallowed his first lies about temporary embarrassment with touching credulity; but as Augustus' losses at play increased, and his application to the patriarchs, Abraham, Moses, and Jacob, for paternal assistance grew more frequent, and for even larger sums, he found with dismay how insincere had been their oily smiles, how wretchedly short was his own boasted tether. All sorts of disagreeable formalities had to be complied with. His life must be insured, and, as a steeple-chase rider, he must pay the extra-dangerous rate. Two solid friends must be found to back the policy; and solidity was the very quality which, to the Hebrew eye at least, De Nares' friends all seemed to lack. Then doctors called to examine him, sent by the Actuaries, and these learned men proceeded upon principles quite other than those of Sir Magnum Bonum; and while no fault was to be found with their courtesy, they were uncompromising and plain-spoken to a degree highly distressing in the shaken state of this wild young man's nerves. They civilly but firmly refused to take anything whatever for granted, and Augustus, after being auscultated and so generally inspected as to remind him of the veterinary examination he had often witnessed in the case of horses about to change hands, had the mortification of learning, from the high rates demanded with a fearful unanimity by the different great officers, how short a lease of the joys or sorrows of this world the professional opinion accorded him.

It was in vain that he fumed and he swore; idle that he referred his tormentors again and again to the fewness of his years, as recorded in Burke's "human sheet book," or to the fact of his brother being a good ten years his senior. The money he wished for, which he must actually have, was, as they told him, "to take or to leave"; and they did not seem to care twopence as to which he elected to do.

And day by day things went worse and worse with him. Well, he was hardly the stamp of man to do any good by gambling. Of course he won sometimes, but neither often nor largely. Of what gamblers call "playing his money," he knew nothing; and even had he known, his temperament was radically opposed to such a course. Winning always made him close-fisted in his stakes at the time; while if the fickle goddess were against him, he would plunge in the wildest way to recover her smiles,—a sure receipt for going to destruction.

It is often a matter of wonder to the uninitiated that men who turn to gambling in the hour of sore need, so very seldom win, and this even at games of pure chance. The key to this mystery lies in the familiar phrase—"The long purse against the short one." But there is considerably more than that at work to defeat the novice; and it is a great blessing to the world at large, not only as regards gambling, but all other speculations, that every business, from hexameters down to bonnet-trimming, is protected from the competition of untrained genius by the inexorable law which makes it still more imperative to be a *workman* of long standing, than the possessor of natural gifts, however brilliant, if you want to make money in any way whatever.

At last the day came when De Nares could no longer raise a single sovereign. He had parted

with his life-interest in the family estates for what he afterwards discovered was a ridiculously small sum; but the bargain was sealed and signed, the money gone, and redress impossible. The insurance offices would risk no more, or, at least, not upon conditions with which he could, however much he would, comply.

One or two rich friends positively lent him a hundred or two the first time he applied. They were, as he soon found, rare specimens, and even they declined to repeat their eccentricities.

In sheer desperation, he swallowed what little pride he had left, swallowed his hatred and his anger, and asked his much-abused brother to help him. He complied to the tune of ten pounds, saying that he had great expenses coming on in the way of wedding presents, and so forth, which, as he was marrying a woman of large fortune, must be paid for in ready money, and warned him he could do no more for some time.

At the clubs where Augustus played, the accounts were settled every Monday. He had not had a very bad week, and contrived to place in the steward's hands enough to meet his obligations. That same night, however, he lost four hundred pounds, and it was on the following morning, at about noon, and having come to the conclusion that something must be done, that he indited the letter to Marion.

That despatched, he bethought him how best to furnish himself with the necessary bank-notes for carrying out the projected elopement. The notorious maternal relative of invention here came to his aid. At first he thought of forging his brother's name. Of course Hector could not expose him, and robbing your own family is not genuine felony—so he told himself. But a moment's reflection told him that no cashier who had held em-

ployment for a single hour could be deceived by so miserable an imitation of Hector's firm signature as alone he was capable of.

So he gave that up, and rode down to Richmond, where Count de Turgy was staying on the river for his health, which had suddenly, though not seriously, gone all wrong.

He did not dream of asking for himself, did not the young reprobate. He had oftentimes heard the Frenchman declare he never lent any one a farthing—and it was quite true; but he boldly said Warrington had sent him down to borrow a hundred and seventy pounds, which he wanted in a hurry, having lost it to a Russian prince, who was leaving at once.

To De Nares' utter discomfiture, however, the Count, who was evidently convalescent, received his carefully prepared announcement with a roar of laughter.

"O quelle blague! O par exemple! On la connaît celle-là! On ne me la fait pas à moi! Que diable!"

"I don't know what you are laughing at," stammers forth De Nares. "What answer am I to give Hector? and can you let him have the money?"

"Come, what would you like for luncheon? You must be hungry after your ride."

"That is no answer to my question, De Turgy"

"Farceur! It is the only one you will get from me. Shall we say Hock or Moselle?"

"If I give you my word that the money is wanted, and at once, will you be serious?"

"Ah, look you, your word. *Parbleu! on ne plaisante pas avec cet article là.* Now, that you want money, there is nothing strange in that; but when you come and tell me our good Hector sends you to ask some of me—bah! Own now that was a—what you call—practical joke—*hein!*"

"You're in such a strange humour to-day, I shall let you have your own way. Well, say I want the money; will you lend me some?"

"Ah, no! Very, very sorry, but impossible."

An expression of rage passed over the would-be borrower's face.

"And why on earth——?"

"Ha! I just tell you. It is *l'honneur*. I have given my *parole* to my dead mother—before she died, *naturellement*—never to lend money."

"Bosh, man! I tell you, I must have some."

"How? You propose to a De Turgy to perjure himself! you——"

"Oh, come, I say; cut that humbug, do! You wouldn't believe me just now. Well, I tell you you are lying now."

"What do I hear?"

"Will you lend it me?"

"*Non, non, non.*"

"Then you may go to the devil!"

"*Allons, mon cher; tu es fou!*"

But Augustus was already out of hearing.

The Gaul solus.

"*Ah, le scélérat! A young robber! Une vraie canaille! Bon, je m'en suis toujours douté!*"

Rage and urgency alike impelled the defeated Guss right swiftly on his return journey.

"D—n all grinning monkeys of foreigners, say I!" he ground out between his teeth as he dismounted, and betook him to his last forlorn hope. This was an appeal to his tailor, jeweller, haberdasher, and one or two more.

Although he owed most of these men little bills for articles supplied, he fortunately had paid them all considerable sums at different times, never asked any of them for money, and, better still, they knew a great deal about Lord Warrington, and very little about himself.

From these obliging dupes—none of whom seemed to be labouring under any inconvenient oath to an entombed mother—the young man succeeded in obtaining, without much difficulty, a total of nearly two hundred pounds, which, he told himself, was amply sufficient to meet the expenses of his projected elopement, even including that hateful but indispensable item, the special license.

As to the parents' consent, he had already provided himself with a forged one. The signatures, to be sure, were not very like those of either Squire Joe or the admirable partner of his bosom; but then, the registrar would never know that. As for the common alternative of swearing the lady to be of age, it was not to be thought of. The most credulous official who ever undertook the frightful responsibility of chaining people together for life, could not have credited the child-like Marion with more than her sweet seventeen summers.

Having procured his supply "of the needful," as he termed it, this model bridegroom drove straight home to Curzon Street, where his brother's unwilling hospitality was still extended to him, under many threats and protests; and certainly he was enough to try the patience of any householder to the utmost. Twice during his present stay had he left his latch-key in the door on coming in at two or three in the morning.

On the first occasion, the night-watchman, who, it will be remembered, was placed on guard, found it a few minutes later; but the second time, Augustus, being by some accident unusually sober, had discovered his error about an hour after his return, and had actually got out of bed and gone downstairs to fetch the said key. It was gone!

A man with any principle would have owned the truth; another lock might easily have been

substituted, and no harm done, beyond a little trouble and expense. But Augustus had another way of managing things. He procured another key from the faithful Baines, by assuring him he had dropped his own down a grating one night in the Strand, when pulling out his cigar-case on leaving the Gaiety.

Meanwhile, the intercourse between this ill-matched *par mobile fratrum* had grown less and less week by week. Hector's clear judgment told him that when two relations cannot agree, the best chance of maintaining even the outward semblance of Christian charity lies in their seeing as little of one another as may be.

"I have only to give rope enough," he said to Vaia, "and he'll surely be civil enough to hang himself—figuratively, of course. As for Marion—good little soul!—she will marry some good man yet."

"God grant it!" fervently responded Vaia; "for the opening of her eyes, and consequent revulsion of feeling, cannot be much longer delayed. That is the only reason I regret they are so effectually parted, that he has no chance now of disgusting her, save by his letters."

"I should think that quite enough; but I doubt if we need be alarmed—he is certain to figure in the police court sooner or later."

To-day the brothers have not met. Warrington is to dine in Park Lane—as he does of late two or three times a week; so De Nares has told the servants he will get some dinner at his club, and now proceeds, without their aid, to pack one small portmanteau, which he can easily carry in his hand if need be, and also a much larger one, for which he proposes to send so soon as it shall suit him to proclaim the fact of his elopement to the world.

This occupies him till it is time to go and

dine. There are a number of men he knows at other tables, for it is Ascot week, and every establishment of the kind is taxed to the utmost limits of its accommodation.

He is glad of this. Somehow, since his nerves have been so "queer," as he terms it, he, who has never been a lover of solitude, grows to detest it with a kind of creepy terror.

"Have a baccarat to-night?" lazily inquires one of his familiar spirits.

"N—no, I think not to-night."

"Oh, I see—other fish to fry, eh?"

"Exactly."

It is already past nine. He plays a couple of rubbers after dinner worse even than usual, and then writes the following laconic note to Marion:—

"Accompany bearer. All is ready.

"A. DE N."

"Now to send it," he says, as, on foot, he draws near his brother's house; then adds, with an oath, "By ——, if after all she don't come!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

FATE.

CONSIDERING what manner of man he was, De Nares had really not concocted his plans so badly.

Of course everything hung upon the momentous question he had just put to himself. If his Jessica refused to fly with him, there was an end to everything. He would then drink an extra quantity of brandy, and having thus secured a night of sweet oblivion, relegate care and her attendant to the ever-glorious uncertainty of to-morrow.

So he sensibly put the contingency of Marion proving recalcitrant as much out of the question as he was able, and proceeded as though he were absolutely certain of her coming.

A carriage and pair stood ready to start in Stanhope Mews hard by.

They would post to Brighton—one of the few roads along which a change of horses is still always procurable; they would reach that portless sea-town in nice time for breakfast, and after breakfast they would while away the time by getting married.

Augustus' programme at present did not go farther than that, though he thought vaguely they would go to the theatre in the evening, like old married people.

Once man and wife, he cared little what followed, and would leave Marion and the future, between them to unravel the remaining skeins of their destiny.

It has not hitherto been mentioned that a kind of intimacy had sprung up between De Nares and the burly night watchman, whose duty it was to

prowl about and guard his brother's treasure house from dark till dawn.

On more than one occasion had the trusty fellow helped the young man to get rid of some officious stranger, who, taking advantage of his "mellow" condition, was "seeing him safe home," as he called it, and also helping to overcome the difficulty of the lock having suddenly become too small for the roysterer's latch-key.

This worthy's name was Cumberland. He was an ex-policeman who had received such serious injuries in the exercise of his professional duties as to be lame for life. He had, however, a fair pension from a grateful country, considering how many brave fellows she has to reward, and he preserved within his breast a very valuable grudge against the criminal classes, which eminently fitted him for such a job as his present one.

"'Night, sir," he says, respectfully touching the old fur cap he wears on seeing Augustus approach. He knows at a glance that he is sober.

"Good-night, Cumberland; you're the very chap I want to see. All quiet to-night?" asks the impending Lorenzo.

"Ay, yer honour, purty quiet. I 'ave heerd some queer noises in the house as is bein' builded of, an' I've seed a shadder or two a-flittin' round them street corners yonder."

"Well?"

"Well, sir, I dursn't take no notice."

"How do you mean you don't dare?"

"Lor, bless you, sir, they be 'complices like enough—parties there o' purpose to draw me away."

"No, by Jove!"

"Lawks, sir, I could tell you tales——"

"Ah, I dare say—strange enough; but see here, my man"—looking at his watch—"what they can't make you do, you must do for me."

"'Ow's that, sir?"

"You see this note. You must take it for me."

"Yer honour must be dreamin', or leastways jokin'."

"Dash it, man, I'm neither. There's no one else I can trust."

"I'll not leave my post to-night—not for the Queen of England. God bless Her Majesty!"

"Now hark ye, Cumberland. It's close by; you'll be back in a moment! Listen, and don't be a fool. There's a lady in danger, as sweet a girl as ever you saw."

"Poor little thing!"

"If I go myself, she's lost. She—she is my sister."

"Never, sir! Then she'll be my lord's sister as well."

"She is—his only sister. Now will you go?"

"Indeed, sir, I'm sorry, but as an honest man I dursn't. Mr. Baines, the butler, is out, and if I was to lose sight of this 'ere door whiles on duty, I should be disgraced for life."

Augustus stamped with rage.

"Oh the dense, thick-skulled stupidity of the lower orders!" he exclaimed. "And whom could you injure by going, I should like to know? His lordship perhaps—my brother. Eh? Well, I met him not ten minutes since, and he said himself you were to go."

"No! Now did he indeed, sir?"

"Do you suppose I'm a liar?"

"Lord forbid, sir. I knows my place."

"Very well, then, what the deuce are you thinking about? See here, I'll take your place. I swear I'll not leave till you come back with or without Miss—I mean my sister. Will that satisfy you?"

"And 'is lordship said so?"

"Yes, half a dozen times over. But if you

haven't the pluck to break through rule to save a woman from the tricks of a villain—from a fate worse than——”

“I'll go, yer honour!” the good fellow interrupted, completely won round at last. “Give me hold o' the letter, and the Lord take care o' the house.”

And having obtained the address—for the note bore none—and last instructions from De Nares, away he sped on his errand.

“There's nothing so confoundedly obstructive as a conscience,” grumbled Augustus, as he lit a cigarette. “Now let me see. There'll be time to fetch down my portmanteau when they come. By the bye, I shall want my overcoat. I think it's hanging just inside.”

And in he went to see. There it was sure enough. He felt in the pockets. A cigar-case, but with only one inhabitant. That would never do. A flask, large, but empty. Worse and worse! Of course he had left the door ajar; and though he had now to go into the room next the conservatory, he forgot to shut it in his hurry to procure what he wanted. To help himself to a dozen of Hector's best regalias, and to fill the portly flagon as full as an egg, was the affair of a minute.

“Lord, how stuffy the house feels to-night!” he muttered, and glanced out at the flowers beyond.

Cumberland could not possibly return with his precious little vessel in tow for a full quarter of an hour. It would be pleasanter far in the conservatory. So out he strolled to the very farthest end of it. Then he threw himself down in a Japanese chair. One sip of Cognac could do no harm, for he had been really abstemious all day. No danger of his taking more. He was right in thinking he loved himself too well to spoil all, at so great a climax of his life as this, by a paltry indulgence which he could so well postpone.

So he took one little pull, smacked his lips,—oh, dear, how delicious even a short spell of abstinence made it appear!—and readjusted the screw stopper.

Then he sat puffing peacefully, almost happily, away. His blood sped more healthily through his veins than it had been wont to do for some time past. He felt as he used to do when riding his earliest steeplechases.

You see he was still so young—not three-and-twenty! Even a spendthrift's fortune takes some spending, and if a youth possess a naturally fine constitution, not even his irregularities can make an old man of him all at once. He thinks of Marion. Never for a moment have his other passions dimmed the flame of his violent, if selfish, love for her.

And can it be that to-night—this very summer night, in a few moments perhaps—they will be flying together! He is not so used up but that something like rapture thrills him through and through as he tells himself that, in spite of all his follies, he is still strong, still full of juvenility.

But the moments are speeding by all the faster for being so pleasant.

“One more whiff,” he says, “and I return to the doorstep”; then mechanically he turns his head in the direction alluded to, and sees that the room through which he has so lately passed is no longer unoccupied.

There is a bright moon to-night, so that De Nares had required no artificial light when helping himself a few moments before to the articles he went in search of.

He is sitting now among the shrubs and plants in such a position as to be well screened from the sight of any one within, while commanding himself a good view of so much of the central portion of the smoking-room as the moon's rays can reach.

At first he is not startled.

One of the servants, no doubt—or Hector! Why should not his brother come in for a moment between his devotions to Vaia and those he still pays to La dame de Pique? He has come to look for letters, likely enough, or for cigars, or what not.

But Augustus has the vision of a young hawk, and as he continues to gaze fixedly, he has repressed an “Hallo, is that you?” which he was about to utter, being considerably bored at the idea of any intrusion upon his plans.

While, then, he keeps on peering curiously from his post of vantage, he is startled by the apparition of as villainous a looking face and figure as he ever beheld in his life. The maurauder is stooping forward, advancing cautiously, and glancing about with evident curiosity, assisting his inspection by the aid of a small dark lantern which he carries in his left hand, his right being armed with some rough instrument whose precise shape is not patent from that distance, but it is probably a crowbar or a “jemmy,” and at least one other sinister form is behind him.

As has been before stated, physical fear has no place in this most faulty young noble's composition any more than has prudence.

“Thieves, by G—!” flashes like lightning across his brain. It is his very first experience of anything of the kind. He has a vague idea that burglars always bolt off harmlessly when disturbed, unless you try to capture them. If he fears anything at this exciting moment, it is being himself caught in a *cul de sac*—gagged, perhaps, or wounded, while cut off from all access to the outer world. Be that as it may, he paused not a moment. With no other precaution than arming his right hand with the heavy brandy flask—no mean weapon in its way—he sprang boldly forward, shouting—

"Thieves! thieves! help! police!"

The scoundrels gave a violent start, evidently expecting no such greeting; but the leader of the gang—an old jail-bird, and a ruffian of ripe experience—saw in a moment that the new-comer upon the scene was alone, and quick as thought he rushed upon him with upraised arm, hissing out low, but distinctly—

"Shut up, will yer, or you're a dead man."

De Nares tried hard to dodge and rush by him, but in vain. Only just ducking from the murderous iron which the burglar strove to bring down with all his brute force upon De Nares' head, they closed, and although very unequal in weight and strength, grappled together in an embrace of mortal fury.

* * * * *

It is never without many a misgiving and many a pang that a nice-minded girl flits clandestinely from all that guards her sweetness and her spotless fame crystal clear in the very heart and centre of a corrupt and licentious world.

The truth is that all mankind and all women-kind, with the exception of a blessedly minute minority, are in league to preserve the innocence of girlhood against a handful of villains who would ruin it if they dared. Were it not for this, the gem-like position they hold in our civilization—where locks, bolts, and bars are all unknown—would be impracticable, short of a special intervention of Providence amounting to a miracle.

Never was a maiden reared in a more morally wholesome home than Marion Heatherly; and it may cause no little wonder that she could yield so far to the sophistries both of her conscience and a wild adventurer of a lover, as to resolve to fly with him from the roof which, if not precisely the paternal one, was still the abode where she

was placed with the consent of the best of fathers and mothers, and with every faith that she would not prove unworthy of the confidence they thus showed they reposed in her.

Common gratitude, too, to Lady Amaranth and her best friend Vaia might well have deterred her from bringing upon these two women the odium such a catastrophe must inevitably entail.

Will it be believed, then, that Marion, prompted doubtless by that capricious tyrant, young love—first love—so argued with herself that she regarded staying as a sin, her going off as a very disagreeable duty?

Yet such was indeed the case. She had promised to be his—the where and the when must depend upon her lord.

Bootless to dwell upon the tears she shed, the prayers, throes, and agonized hesitations preliminary to taking this desperate step, which, in plain English, was no better than a shameful and vulgar escapade.

“It was written in the book of Fate.”

De Nares' note found her ready and on the watch. She herself, hooded and cloaked, managed to open the front door to Cumberland before the man had time either to knock or ring. Till they had proceeded some way towards Curzon Street, she never even looked at the envelope.

Neither spoke, for the excellent reason that they had nothing to say. Moreover, their pace was hurried in the extreme. She had handed to her companion the small black bag which was all her luggage, in order that she might rush along the faster; and, lame as he was, it was to the watchman's credit that he managed, spite of years and wounds, to keep pace with her.

When, in less than ten minutes, they emerged from the end of South Audley Street and got

within sight of Lord Warrington's house, they were not a little surprised to see the policeman of the beat standing at the open door, lantern in hand.

"Hullo, Ned," he called out, seeing Cumberland, but in a voice low and awe-stricken, "I've been a-lookin' for you; thought you must be inside."

"I left a man in my place," said Ned. "Have yer been inside yourself?"

"Only just noticed the door was open."

At that moment footsteps were heard within; and three dark forms, bearing a confused mass among them, were making for the door.

Instantly the policeman sounded his rattle.

"Easy, there," says the foremost burglar; "you may take us all, and welcome. My poor dad is done for—young swell done it. Tripped 'im up, an' dad fell with his head agin' the ironwork yonder in the greenhouse."

And Marion stood by and heard this.

Thieves! death! And in her very path to him! She rushed past the group, through the smoking-room, out into the conservatory into the moonlight. There lay her lover's form, ghastly white, stark upon his back, his sightless eyes glaring from their orbits.

She raised him in her arms, kneeling beside him, and called him piteously by name.

Meanwhile the young burglar is saying to the two men of the force—

"I done for the young swell though. I gave him a slug out o' my bulldog just as the dad fell, and though I swing, I'm glad on it."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ON HORROR'S HEAD.

LORD WARRINGTON, sauntering back from his club in the best of health and spirits, little dreams of the horrors which await him at home.

He is earlier than usual. The best ventilated of card-rooms—even when gas is rigidly banished from them, as it always should be—are apt to prove stuffy upon a hot June night such as this one.

It is so delightful to get out into the cool starlight or moonlight even of a busy town.

So he does not make his pace by any means rapid; he only thinks hard, as is his irresistible impulse at most times.

“Could I have won another point in that last game by not over-trumping? Let me see.”

And he thinks the intricate problem out, deciding finally against his own play.

“Yes, yes; I might have saved the rubber. Nobody saw it though, which is one comfort; and I am still a good winner on the evening, which is another. Ah, I wish I could play better! Yet I have a name among the talent; but for all that, I throw tricks away, see my error, and go on just the same! Well, I suppose if one never made mistakes, the game would lose all interest. And Vaia! sweet Vaia; how glorious she looked to-night! Vaia wants me to make her a whist-player. How little she dreams what that implies! I see her drift—she thinks thereby to keep me more at home after we are married. Innocent little device! I would rather sit and look at her

now than play any game that ever was invented. Strange that men should not think the same after they are married. I wonder why it is? Shall I be so? Oh, why not? Am I such a conceited fool as to expect to be different to the rest? Ah, nature is like the policemen—it always keeps saying, ‘Move on.’

“Well, I am a very happy man! Should be, at least, but for one thing; that terrible thorn in my side—my brother! Oh, that some one would take him away! I don’t wish for his death, of course; and were he dying, I should do my best to save him. Small praise to me either; but, oh, why can he not go and live for twenty years or so in the moon—some planet—or, at least, at the Antipodes?”

A man passed, puffing away at a cigar.

“That man is a fool!” soliloquises Hector. “It is a mistake to smoke when either the air or yourself are in motion—especially you. No, he is not enjoying himself; but then, he *thinks* he is, and that is almost as good. Poor little Marion, how I pity her! Pretty, too—pretty as a sugar-plum. Not that that style ever says anything on the chapter of passion to *me*; but I *like* her to any extent. No, give me before all an important-looking woman. If she is lovely like my Vaia, all the better; but—hallo! why, what in the world is up?”

The last words he utters as he raises his head from the downcast attitude of thought on approaching his own door. It cannot be said that he is astonished. Stockton’s warning, his own vivid recollection of the villainous sham picture-dealer, and the very expenses he has hitherto been incurring in the way of precaution, all have tended to prepare him for some attempt, at least, on the part of *messieurs les assassins*, as Alphonse Karr called them.

The dark forms of half a dozen policemen encumber the doorsteps, and all their heads converge in the direction of the open door, so intent are they all; for Hector arrives at the very moment when the son of the old burglar is giving utterance to the words which closed the last chapter, in so strange a gush of filial grief and murderous brutality. A small crowd is already collecting.

There are other figures in the doorway besides the constables, one of which Hector at once recognises as Cumberland. He lays his hand on the rough fellow's arm, saying—

"Well, my man, what has happened? Let us hear."

"Why, here be his lordship!" exclaims the watchman, directing the attention of the others to the master of the house; whereupon one of their number, with a somewhat unusual amount of brains, confronts the peer with stern decision, and—bearing in mind what the young ruffian, now standing handcuffed within, had just uttered about putting a slug from his bulldog into poor De Nares' skull—says—

"My lord, may I beg you not to enter the house for a minute or two?"

"Not enter!" in great surprise.

"No, my lord, not till I send some of us in to see. I'm afeard your lordship's brother is badly hurt."

"Thanks, officer," quickly returns Warrington, "but I'd rather know the worst."

And he makes his way past the whole group, and is striding through the hall, regardless alike of the life and death which encumber it, when a wild and hideous scream, as from a maniac, assails his ears, and he rushes on to whence it comes.

Five seconds bring him face to face with a sad spectacle indeed.

Marion has that instant discovered that the form she holds in her arms is already a corpse.

"How comes she here?" is the thought which, even in this scene of horror, flashes irresistibly through Hector's brain.

"Great God!" he cries, as he stoops kneeling beside the ghastly group, "is he dead?" and he catches hold of his brother's stiffening frame. But the only answer is a thud upon the tiled floor. The unhappy girl has fainted.

Several of the police have followed close upon Warrington's heels.

"Any use to fetch a doctor, my lord?" asks one.

"He is dead," is the calm, but solemn reply. "But run for a doctor—quick! any—the first you find."

And three men run off in different directions to execute the order.

"Can any of you tell me how this lady came here?" he asks, as he raises the unconscious Marion, and places her gently in a chair.

"That I can answer, my lord," replies Ned Cumberland. "I brought her."

"You?"

"Ay, my lord. Her brother found me at my post scarce half an hour ago."

"Her brother!" interrupts the peer, amazed.

"Ay, your honour, her brother and yours—the poor young gentleman as lies there."

"What tale is this? We have no sister."

"But, my lord, he called her so."

"Stay," said the master of the house; "my first duty is to attend to her, though you are wrong in supposing her to be a relation."

By this time some of the maid-servants of the establishment were peeping in, scared and trembling, at the door.

Hector called for the housekeeper.

"Let a close cab be fetched, and this young lady taken back to Lady Amaranth Temple's in Park Lane."

At this moment Marion began to recover consciousness. She presently gave a violent start as she convulsively clutched her forehead with both hands.

"Marion, dear, be calm," said Hector, in a voice which he did not forget to make kind, and supporting her with his arm as she strove to sit upright. "You are going home, dear child; come," and he signed to some of those present to shut out his brother's lifeless form from the possibility of the poor girl seeing it.

The cab was announced, and he almost carried Marion to it, who, passive as a child—indeed, she was probably still half-stunned—suffered herself to be placed in it with two of the women, and was driven off, never having attempted to utter a word.

It was only on re-entering the house that Warrington noticed the body of the dead burglar, which had been carried there by the other thieves in their attempt to escape with it, when they had been confronted by the officers of the law. These latter had hastily placed it on one side of the entrance hall.

As the peer's eye now fell upon it, Ned Cumberland began to account for its being there.

"One moment," said Warrington, "you shall tell me all presently; my poor brother's remains claim my first care."

As soon as the policemen, who had been summoned from their neighbouring beats by the watchman's rattle, had recognised the gravity of the affair, they despatched one of their number to the nearest station; and when the reserve, always kept in readiness at these posts, had appeared upon the

scene, the first arrivals immediately retired each to his own beat.

There remained now upon the spot exactly six; that is, five rank and file, and a sergeant in command. Two of this number sufficed to guard the open door alike from undue ingress and egress, while of the rest a couple stood guard over the thieves in the hall, and the others, with Cumberland, accompanied the master of the house to where the hapless Augustus had lain during this brief space; not forgotten, indeed,—for had not the doctors been sent for?—but his remains perforce apparently neglected until she who had loved him—

“Not wisely, but too well,”

had been removed in safety from this fell house of violence and death.

“Carry him up to his room,” ordered his brother, “the front one on the second floor, and lay him on the bed just as he is. Do not attempt to remove any of his clothes; the doctors must see him just as he fell.”

Needless to say, these orders were at once obeyed. The doctors, three in number, arrived just as the sad *cortège* reached its destination.

In moments of sore trial, what balm is the face of a friend! It was the first faint gleam of comfort which Hector had experienced since his return home upon this fatal evening, when he recognised in one of the medical men his somewhat more than mere acquaintance, Sir Magnum Bonum.

The peer wrung his hand almost passionately as he led the great doctor silently to the bedside. Sir Magnum took a candle from one of the bystanders, and held it close to one of the dead man's eyes. There was no need to raise the lid. No one had as yet had leisure to perform the pious office of closing them. Nor was there any occasion to

speaking; Sir Magnum's face was enough as he turned to Warrington and shook his head. For form's sake, indeed, he felt for pulse where no pulse would ever beat again; for mere form's sake, too, he appealed to those two other men of learning, who happened, until to-night, to be equally unknown to Sir Magnum and to fame, and whom he delighted by alluding to as his colleagues.

One of the two was a middle-aged man, with a small and poor practice, and a rapidly increasing family. Let us not think hardly of him, if—even in this terrible moment of a young lover being shot down by a miscreant, in the pride of his vigour and the beauty of his two-and-twenty years—the patient, struggling man was looking forward to the joy of, in a few hours, reading with his poor wife of his being summoned for the first time to the house of a nobleman, and in company with one of the foremost court physicians.

To him it was deputed to make the necessary arrangements customary after a death.

Then all went downstairs, and the sergeant said to the baronet, "There's one of the burglars met his death to-night as well. There he is, sir, lying alongside of the table. Will you certify, or shall we wait for the parish doctor?"

Now Sir Magnum had an innate loathing for the pauper, and especially the criminal, classes, which not all his early hospital experience had been able perceptibly to palliate. Everything that was of the great unwashed seemed to him loathsome of contact; and he would sooner have attended a lady with the plague than a slut with a bad finger.

He was upon the point, then, of declining the verification proposed to him with some *hauteur*, when he remembered that no source of information should be unexplored which might furnish detail of the very sensational episode with which he intended

to regale his dear duchesses upon the following afternoon.

No old lady could complain at a fee of a couple of guineas, even if not strictly ill enough to demand medical aid, when so thrilling a tale should fall from the lips of Sir Magnum.

He therefore expressed his particular desire to view the plebeian corpse.

"Indeed," he added, "it is the bounden duty of one of us to do so; for we cannot tell otherwise but what his condition may not be hopeless."

At this juncture who should arrive upon the scene but the faithful Baines. Now if a perfect valet is a comfort in health and prosperity, he is simply above all price in sickness and trouble. Never did his master feel greater need of his ministrations.

It will be remembered that he was absent on special leave. A friend in a similar position of life, "had went and got married." A nocturnal fête was the result, and Baines, best man in the morning, had of course been bidden to supper and the dance.

On nearing his master's house—it was now only about one in the morning, for Baines was the last man to abuse a privilege—he had fallen in with the maid-servants on their way back from conducting Miss Heatherly to Park Lane, and had been made acquainted with the chief heads of the tragedy, though of course in a manner as garbled as it was spasmodic and hysterical.

Like a true valet, his one thought was for his master.

That proverb is all nonsense about no man being a hero in the eyes of this functionary, or, at any rate, there are exceptions. Hector was to Baines as much a demi-god as was his great prototype, or rather namesake, unto the blind Homer.

In moments of sore trial and perplexity we often see the servant take command, and the master or mistress meekly obey. It is not the least privilege of long faithfulness and devotion.

So it was on the present occasion. When Lord Warrington saw his man, he simply said, as if nothing had happened,—

“Oh, there you are, Baines.”

“My lord,” he replied, speaking low, but with apparent calmness; “your lordship mustn’t sleep here to-night. There’s a bedroom free at the club, the same your lordship dressed in yesterday. Shall I take your things there?”

“Yes, that will be best; pray do, and at once. Take a cab. I will follow almost immediately in another.”

The next moment a table-cover, which had been hastily thrown over the corpse, was turned down, and Hector, bending over it with the doctors, recognised, in the dead malefactor, his strange acquaintance of three months ago—that sham picture-dealer, indeed, to whom he had instinctively given the sobriquet of “the convict.”

CHAPTER XXXVII.

NEXT DAY.

A FACULTY for sleep under all kinds of painful conditions is the glorious privilege—we had almost said monopoly—of the young.

Marion Heatherly did not awake on the morning following these gruesome events until past ten o'clock; and when she did so, her first aspiration was to return to the land of dreams. Individually speaking, no possible occurrence could be more fortunate for her than De Nares' death, although it is lamentable to dwell upon the price Fate exacted from her for this blessing in the shape of a curse, in the manner and conditions of her finding his lifeless body.

Throughout the short drive from Curzon Street to Park Lane, the poor child had remained in a state of torpor—half-stunned, indeed. On reaching Lady Amaranth's house—too nervous even to let the cabman leave his horse—the housekeeper had herself unwieldily descended from the vehicle, and knocked timidly at the door.

The excellent woman was not without her suspicions that, according to strict rules of propriety, this very young lady "didn't ought to have been out at all." It so happened that Lady Amaranth and Vaia were at a ball, at which festivity Warrington had put in an appearance for half an hour, and had one waltz with his *inamorata* before going to the club.

They had left Park Lane before Marion's evasion, which very decided step no one was aware of in the

establishment but her own maid. On first missing her, the Abigail had felt quite a panic of terror, but it struck the girl that before giving the alarm it might be well to look on the toilet and writing-table in her young mistress' room, to see whether some note had not been left there with a view to explaining matters.

Such a paper she found. It ran thus:—

“EMMA,—

“When you miss me to-night, do not be frightened, or say a word to any one. Find some pretext for keeping Miss Temple out of my room in the morning. I told her not to disturb me on her return from the ball.

“I am in good hands, and to-morrow you shall hear from me.

“M. H.”

Marion had thought of taking her devoted maid with her; but she felt instinctively that her lover would be angry. There was, of course, the double chance of discovery—from her peaching at the last moment—should her supposed loyalty not, after all, be proof against the hope of a liberal reward; and then, again, the sudden disappearance of two persons from the house would have been far more likely to lead to suspicion and an immediate pursuit, which might frustrate every plan of the eloping lovers, than was the stealthily contrived flight of the young lady by herself, while an accomplice remained within the citadel to cover, and, if need be, deny, her escape.

After reading the above brief note, Emma had taken the obvious precaution of locking her mistress' door and pocketing the key. She then proceeded to go quietly to bed, and, as she hoped, to sleep.

Wonder and excitement, however, rendered the second part of her programme less easy than she had expected, and she lay still awake and speculating when the "growler" from Curzon Street rattled up to the door. Then came the knock.

It was not my lady, that was evident. The girl's attic looked front, and the sound of the cab stopping, which it did after the fashion of its kind, with a jerk and a bang, was not a bit like the Amaranthian *huit ressorts*. Then the knock was none of our James', who, moreover, would have a latch-key.

In a twinkling the maiden had donned a discarded tea-gown of her young lady's over her night-dress, slipped her not very large feet for a daughter of Albion into slippers, and stood peering over the banisters. She had crept down one storey through the well of the staircase. Nobody went to the door. The butler, being a family man, lodged, with his belongings, in the neighbourhood. The second footman and the page were in the third heaven of the god Morpheus, not having expected to be disturbed. The groom of the chambers, Mr. Powles, was away at the same wedding "hop" whence Mr. Baines returned to a scene of such dire contrast.

The knock was repeated, this time less timidly, and the handmaiden ran noiselessly down and opened the door.

Not a word was spoken. No personal acquaintance at that time existed between the female servants of the two establishments. To any more observant eye than that of the old night-cabman, the four women would have appeared as beings moving in a trance. Not even "Thank you," or "Good-night," was uttered; nor did it for a moment occur to Marion to take leave in any way of her escort.

The door was closed, the housekeeper paid the driver, and started for home with her companion as fast as her corpulence would permit.

Marion, meanwhile, suffered herself to be half-carried up the staircase, and to be undressed and put to bed like a child. Her eyes were fixed and glassy, for they still saw before them the ghastly face of her dead lover with far more clearness than the objects which were now really before them.

Emma, knowing nothing of the tragedy, but feeling persuaded, from all she observed, that some event of due import had occurred, was naturally devoured by curiosity. There also lurked, probably, some spark of resentment within her that her young mistress had not taken her with her upon that mysterious and evidently ill-omened flight. We do not easily forgive half-confidences. Emma was even now saying to herself that if *she* had been consulted, and her protecting presence not dispensed with, very probably this evil, whatever it was, might have been averted.

At last, in spite of the deep awe with which Miss Heatherly's whole aspect and bearing inspired her, she made one desperate bid for information, telling herself that if she sought her pillow again before some light were shed upon this mystery, she must toss and turn till morning without closing an eye.

Poor girl! She never to her dying day will forget the answer she received, nor, above all, the manner of it.

"Oh, do not speak to me! Go, go; for God's sake, go!"

Yet after she was gone, Marion, as has been said, slept almost instantly.

Naturally, a tremendous blow affects us differently, according to our condition at the time of receiving it.

A mortal horror had fallen on the tender, gentle Marion after a season of struggle, fear, and anguish, when her nervous system was highly wrought to a pitch which, of itself, constituted almost a disease.

There were but three things nature could do with her—kill her, make a maniac of her, or grant her sleep—much sleep, peaceful, profound; and with her beneficent instinct, nature mercifully selected the last.

Then came the waking; very late, but still it came. Well, she could bear it safely now—all the dread recurrence of that brief but frightful scene. The girl had by this time accumulated a store, a capital to draw upon, of, what we may term, the capacity for bearing without danger to life or reason.

Lady Amaranth and her daughter did not enter the breakfast-room until ten o'clock, and at that hour Marion still enjoyed oblivion.

As her ladyship comes in, she complains pettishly of the want of taste with which the servants have arranged the floral decorations of the table in some new crystals given her by Lady Bagley. She is breakfasting downstairs to-day, contrary to all her most confirmed habits, for the workmen are in possession upstairs, 'painting the lily and gilding refined gold.'

"By the bye, Vaia," she says, "Lady Bagley expected to win—I forget how much—upon Olaf yesterday. Just see what came in first."

And Vaia, little dreaming what she holds in her hand as she does so, takes up the *Morning Post*, and reads out, with that listlessness observable in people who do not bet, "The Railway Cup, for three-year-olds and upwards——"

"Yes, never mind the conditions, love. What won?"

"Prince Perovsky's Olaf, first."

"Oh, I'm so glad! So particularly pleased. Dear

Lady Bagley, she tells me she's had such a bad time lately—quite in low water. Perhaps now she won't have to let her house to the Howards, who want it for a month."

But her daughter hears her not. Among the very first to form part of that small crowd that gathered around Lord Warrington's house on the night before, had been the ubiquitous reporter.

In the next column to that from which Miss Temple was reading aloud to her mother this item of sporting intelligence which so interested the speculative Lady Bagley, her eye accidentally caught the alarming heading,—

"FEARFUL TRAGEDY IN CURZON STREET."

"MURDER OF THE HONOURABLE AUGUSTUS DE NARES!"

And, behold, an already graphic and fairly accurate account followed of the whole horrible affair. Not that Vaia could get beyond the first few lines. A vague exclamation from her attracted her mother's attention, who saw her turn ashy pale, and drop the paper. Lady Amaranth had, in fact, only just time to rush round from her own side of the table to prevent her daughter from falling from her chair.

"My poor child, what is it?" exclaimed that not usually most tender of mothers.

Vaia, with closed eyes, continued to move her arms about strangely.

She was only half-unconscious, and fancied she still could search the paper, which, in point of fact, now lay on the floor. Lady Amaranth hastily bathed her forehead with one hand, while the other arm supported the fainting girl. Almost at once the latter opened her eyes, and faltered,—

"But *he* is not hurt—he—he. Oh, can't you tell me?"

A moment later her mother managed to get to the bell, and on it being answered, sent for salts,

et cetera, and then, as Vaia continued to entreat for news, though she was still incapable of reading the newspaper, Lady Amaranth picked it up, and silently, but swiftly, ran her eye over every word of the half-column of the appalling article.

She wisely forbore to reassure her child until she had ascertained there need be no going back from the announcement of his safety.

"No, thank heaven," she exclaimed, with a long breath of relief, "dear Hector is safe. I have only kept you waiting to be sure of it. But poor Augustus! It is too terrible! Whatever his faults may have been—and you know how angry I have felt with him—to die so young, and in so tragic a manner!"

"Poor boy—poor boy!" was all that Vaia could murmur; but she had already with her first returning breath sent up to God a heartfelt thanksgiving for the escape and safety of her betrothed.

Lady Amaranth now kissed her kindly, and whispered,—

"How do you feel, dearest, now? There is something more here which will excite you terribly, I fear. Can you bear it, or shall I wait awhile?"

"No; now, please, mamma, dear. I—I can bear anything now I know he is not injured!" and up went her grateful eyes once more heavenward.

Thus reassured, and keeping the while one of Vaia's cold little hands within her own, Lady Amaranth read out from the end of the article as follows,—

"When Lord Warrington returned home and found a gathering of policemen and others about his door, he proceeded at once along the hall to the back room, where he saw his brother lying dead upon the ground, and at his side a young lady, who, it is understood, was shortly to have been married to the ill-fated gentleman. This lady is well known

in fashionable circles, and is a daughter of Mr. Heatherly, of Studfield.

"As far as we have been able to ascertain, no explanation of her presence upon the scene of the murder has yet been suggested. His lordship immediately had her conveyed back to Park Lane, where she has, for some weeks past, been the guest of Lady Amaranth Temple, the engagement of whose only daughter to Lord Warrington it was lately our duty to announce."

"Marion!" was all that Vaia exclaimed. Then she strove to rise from her chair, as though she would instantly seek her friend, but found she was still without sufficient strength.

"Stay! I will go up," said her mother. "You must not try to move yet." But even as she walked, firm and erect as ever, towards the door, the little maid Emma appeared at it.

The servants had read the papers—and all contained the news—long before their ladies were up, or even awake. Emma's usually very pink cheeks were now white, and full of still coursing tears.

"Oh, m' lady! Oh, Miss Vaia!" And then down went her head into her hands, and she stood there sobbing aloud.

"How is she?" gasped Vaia. "Oh, my poor, poor, darling friend!"

"Vaia," said her mother, "I will go to her." Then to the maid, "She is awake, is she not?"

The girl nodded, her honest heart too full for words.

So Lady Amaranth went. She knocked, and receiving a low "Come in," entered her guest's room.

Marion lay wide awake upon her back, an untouched supply of tea and toast upon a table within reach.

She started slightly as she recognised her visitor, but made no show of sitting up, or, indeed, of moving

at all. She looked, in fact, frightened of her. But, needless to say, her ladyship had not come to scold.

"My poor child, how are you? Forgive me for disturbing you, but I was so anxious. Vaia has but half recovered from a fainting fit. I suppose none of the servants dared tell us. Poor Vaia stumbled upon an account of the whole terrible affair in the newspaper."

"It is kind and good of you. I—I have not behaved well to you, but—you will not scold me to-day, will you, Lady Amaranth? I—I feel almost as if I too was dead."

"You had better not get up."

"I do not believe I could."

"Am I annoying you? Shall I go now?"

"Dear Lady Amaranth, you are not annoying me!" And there was genuine surprise at the suggestion.

"Shall I send Vaia to you presently? You will see your friend Vaia, of course, dear?"

"Oh, yes, I will see Vaia;" but the words were cold as ice.

There was a pause, and then Marion said, "She must not stay long. Oh, you don't know how dreadful it was!"

But still there was, so to say, no expression in the voice or accent.

"You shall do all you wish, and nothing else," said Lady Amaranth kindly. She would have bent and kissed her, but literally feared to do so, she could not tell why.

Perhaps it was that any kiss might have reminded the widowed girl of many things.

Her instinct taught her a more useful course. It was a dark, cloudy day for June, and the rain fell steadily. So Lady Amaranth began talking of the weather, meanwhile stealing her arm beneath the little sufferer's shoulders, raised her and set her

drinking tea, and presently eating a little, all without clearly realizing that she ate or drank.

Then she left her, and when Vaia at length arrived in her sorrowing friend's room, lo! she was again asleep—almost with a smile upon her parted lips.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

VAIA AS A COMFORTER.

LATER in the same day, Vaia received the following brief note from Lord Warrington :—

“ MY DEAREST,—

“ I am going down to Glentworth (the name of his place) by the afternoon train, where I shall remain, of course, quite alone, until forced to come up for the inquest. I shall then see you, which you must forgive me for not attempting to do now, and go back to Glentworth, as my poor brother’s funeral will necessarily take place down there.

“ Pray write to me to-day before post-time, that I may have a letter from you the first thing in the morning.

“ Your devoted

“ WARRINGTON.

“ P.S.—How is our poor friend, Marion? My love to your mother.”

It was probably the best thing he could do. Oh, how to be pitied are those who, for lack of means or other reason, find themselves doomed to remain upon the scene where some such horror as Lord Warrington had lately witnessed has just been perpetrated! How right is Burns when he sings forth that the true rapture of having money is—

“ Not for to hide it in a hedge,
Nor for a train dependent;
But for the glorious privilege
Of being independent ”!

And Warrington wanted to be alone. He was a man to whom anything resembling deceit was abhorrent, and this above all in his own proper person. Now, although he was deeply grieved at the manner of poor Augustus' death, he was too old a pursuer of truth, and too devoted a one, to tell either himself or others the lie that he felt any genuine regret at the bare fact of his brother being no more; and still less that he had suddenly made the discovery after his death that he had loved him all along without knowing it.

Hector had long been in a state of deep sorrow at not possessing a brother he could, by any sophistries even, bring himself to love. In this respect he was in the same position since the catastrophe as before it. George Eliot has beautifully said,—

“When Death, the great reconciler, has come, it is never our tenderness that we repent of, but our severity.”

Yes; but for this to have force, there must surely have been in life both a lack of tenderness where it was deserved, and an excess of severity.

Hector, then, mainly ran away from the misery of having to give expression on all sides to feelings which he did not possess. Moreover, although he feared not death himself, he had a constitutional loathing of it in others. It is not too much to say that he would far rather be a cow-boy upon a North American ranche—ay, now even, accustomed as he was to every luxury of civilization—than be the richest of undertakers, or have changed places with a physician as exalted as the great Sir Magnum Bonum himself.

There is nothing so unlovely as death and disease, and some amongst us cannot help realizing this to an almost morbid degree.

Such was Hector's case. His finely strung nature was consistent throughout. A false note in an

orchestra, even a solecism in a lady's toilette, was a sensible pain to him; and the noises at a railway station almost drove him mad. There was no affectation in this, and he seldom mentioned it; but the fact nevertheless existed.

It was part of the penalty he paid for making his life an almost unbroken chase after the true and the beautiful. Such natures may suffer most acutely, but they also enjoy most intensely.

He awoke on the morning following his arrival at the—considering his rank and ancient lineage—decidedly modest halls of his ancestors, wonderfully composed and refreshed, and almost, indeed, in a mood partially to enjoy the letter from his *fiancée* which his man handed to him before he was up; for he was intensely fond of the girl who loved him.

If any persons have drawn the inference that Hector's feeling for her was not a very passionate one, they have read these pages askew. It was precisely because he feared that Vaia would not, with her poor, proud nature, be satisfied with so common an attribute of love, that he had felt bound, before she promised herself to him, to warn her that he did actually prize her youth and beauty in a perhaps inordinate degree—so much so, in truth that should anything happen to these treasures, she must hardly feel indignant with him for mourning their loss in a way perhaps insulting to her remaining possessions of mind, heart, manner, and the rest.

Since that day when he asked her if she could be his upon so strange and frank a statement as he made to her as to the only love he could conceive, and therefore feel, the engaged pair had had many and many a talk upon the subject wherein definition and hair-splitting itself had fairly run riot.

His logic was unanswerable, but yet, as Vaia finally told him, she was very sorry he could not love her

as she loved him; but as he gave her all he had, and she cared for his little finger—nay, the shadow thereof—more than anything else upon the face of the earth, why, she must fain take him as he was, and make the best of him.

While he swore he would be only too happy to repay her in kind, and prayed he might one day be like herself and the rest of his superiors, she could make him no sort of answer to his hard-reasoned theory.

“Take an example,” he said, during one of the most notable of these confabulations: “A man is infatuated with a house; he is soon to live in it, and he stands for hours every day looking at it. But enemies come who are too strong for him, and pull it down brick by brick before his eyes. He has a constant nature—so, I think, have I—and as long as a single room remains, he stands, as before, fondly gazing. But when the last brick is removed, there is no house left. Then how can he love it? He loves its memory, that is all. Now I love you for all you are, and all the qualities that make you up; but the reason I will not deceive you by calling it true love is, that if you lost all these, and I found them in some other, I dare not be so bold as to swear I should not love them in her—which I know is not your idea of a real love.”

“Well, at present, at any rate,” she replied, “you are quite, quite sure you love me?”

And he answered,—

“More than that. I feel convinced the man does not breathe who could love you half so intensely.”

Since they had been engaged, he had never left her, so that this was the first love-letter she had ever penned to him. It might seem cold, unless we remember that exuberant love is subdued in the shadow of death.

"MY LOVE," it ran,—

"It seems so strange to say so, but I am glad you went away. It is like you and your wisdom. Only think, mamma's and my first intimation of the awful event was in the morning paper at breakfast!

"The servants all knew it, it seems, except our two lady's maids. Hers—as I think you know—is deaf, and mine French; but none had the courage to break it to us.

"It is only a few moments ago that poor Marion, who all the morning appeared but semi-conscious, sent for me and said she was frightened to keep silent any longer, and must give me her account of the whole terrible business.

"I wonder, my love, how you have been accounting in your own mind for her presence at your house, and whether any suspicion of the truth occurred to you! The poor girl declares—and there is not the slightest appearance of her being light-headed, or under any delusion—that poor Augustus had written two or three days ago, urging, ordering her to fly with him and be married by special license. His messenger came for her last night at the appointed hour, and found her ready to join her lover. Marion—who, I am sorry and uneasy to say, never shed a tear during our interview—says that she fears she must seem to have acted ungratefully towards my mother and me, but that upon her oath she did what she looked upon as her duty in obeying her future husband, (as she believed him to be,) and that she prayed long and earnestly for light before taking the course she did.

"Mamma and I are now, of course, in no mood to be angry with the poor child; we are far too sorry for her, and our great fear is that she may have to appear at the inquest. However, Sir Magnum, who has just left us, thinks not. He says her deposition can be taken down and put in as

evidence instead. The officials, he says, are very tender—and properly so—to ladies; more especially young girls, when they are in no way implicated in the crime.

"I wanted her to see him, but she would not. She says she is not ill. But he wrote something for her to take, and I will see that she obeys.

"I wish I could think of something to say that would comfort you, or even soothe you in some little degree. You must take the will for the deed, for you know it is sincere if ever so powerless.

"For ourselves, we have not been able as yet even to think. That we shall go away as fast as ever we can, you may be certain, and take Marion with us, to some very quiet sea-place, where you could come in a few days—Worthing, perhaps, or Newhaven. I dread mamma proposing the Continent. She always does. I am like you in being sick of it, and never caring to leave the three kingdoms again. I smile now as I remember a saying of yours, that nothing is worth going abroad a second time for but the pictures.

"Your own most loving
"VAIA."

Hector many times pressed the two sheets of paper upon which his *fiancée's* letter was written to his fervid and reverent lips during the perusal, and most of all hung over the concluding lines.

"Bless her, bless her!" he whispered, with supremest unction, and his eyes were full of tears—those eyes the world thought so proud, and which had shed no drop over the death of an only brother!

And with regard to this same poor murdered relation, a strange thought just now strikes him. He asks himself whether in his composition there enters the power of grieving, even for the beloved and worthy. Had Augustus been a pearl among

brothers, how would he, Hector, have felt at this moment? As in all his investigations, he was here determined that his conviction should in no wise be warped by his will.

The answer comes, slowly and firmly,—

“No; I fear I have not the gift of mourning.”

And he felt humiliated in his own eyes.

“Do I flatter myself,” he added, after a pause, “when I say that, *per contra*, few can treat the loving ones who are dear to me so well?”

Then like lightning came the thought, “And if Vaia were to die, what should I feel?”

Again he took time to consider.

He remembered a sketch which appeared some years ago in an ephemeral publication of some kind. It was called the Eudaimometer, which was an imaginary machine for measuring joy. The pith of the story lay in the discrepancy between various cases of given circumstances and the result so far as content was concerned.

“Ah!” he murmured, “human joy is never so large a thing but we can measure it; but who shall presume to fathom grief—not as I feel it, who am evidently but half a man in this respect, but as I see, I know, it is felt by others?”

“And to return to Vaia; what should I feel at her death? Anguish, misery, as though the sunlight of the world were dimmed for ever. Oh, yes, yes, yes! But what would I give to bring her back? Ay, there’s the true test. Most people would answer thoughtlessly, ‘Anything, everything,’ and go on their way rejoicing.

“But both these have too strong a family likeness to ‘nothing’ to satisfy my philosophy. Would I consent to be poor for evermore?

“Yes, undoubtedly. Well, that is something.

“Would I consent to be falsely accused, say of forgery or cheating at cards, and that people should

believe it, and none of my friends ever speak to me again?

"Yes, if *she* knew I was innocent, and clung to me spite of all. Oh, yes! But would I give my eyesight to bring her from the grave?"

"No; undoubtedly no!"

"Yet she would gladly give hers for me!"

"No; that sorrow which thinks of price is not true mourning, and I have no right to lay claim to the holy talent of grieving, in which my Vaia, as in everything else that soars beyond a mere enlightened selfishness, o'ertops me, and keeps me eternally humble!"

And Hector leapt out of bed, and prepared, as best he might, to drag through the weary day.

Upon the miseries of those immediately following we shall surely be thanked for drawing a discreet veil.

The crime produced, as it was bound to do, intense and widespread interest. Poor De Nares at once rose into a hero and a martyr for having, all unarmed as he was, slain one powerful enemy ere he fell.

And as for Lord Warrington's bearing and fortitude, they were much praised throughout the inquiry.

Marion, much to everyone's relief, was not forced to appear.

The deceased convict proved to be one of the worst of his class, and to have spent by far the greater portion of his life in working for the crown. With all this, it transpired that he was a model family man, and most affectionate husband and father.

His son was duly committed to trial for the murder of De Nares.

To have done for good and all with a disagreeable subject, it may be as well to mention in this place that some months later an impartial jury found him guilty, and he was sentenced to be hanged.

It transpiring, however, that he was but nineteen years of age, and that at the moment he fired the fatal shot he had good reason to suppose De Nares was in the act of throttling his father, a petition to the Home Secretary was got up in his favour, who advised Her Majesty to commute the sentence to one of twenty years' hard labour.

Among the most potent of the names appended thereunto figured those of the gentle Marion Heatherly and of Lord Warrington.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A TEARLESS WEDDING.

THREE months have passed since the gloomy scene enacted in Curzon Street had proved a nine days' wonder in the land.

To-day, in a very dull sea-board town, Vaia Temple is led to the unfashionable local altar by Lord Warrington.

She is attended by her mother, and but a solitary bridesmaid in disguise—her faithful Marion.

There are no dainty dresses, no favours, no merry marriage-bells, no wedding guests or impending feast, no nuptial march, no anything, we were about to say; but yes—there were two articles whose presence is always taken for granted on these occasions, but one or both of which are more often absent altogether than it would be quite decent to allow, or even hint at, in polite society. We allude to a couple of human hearts between which, if there is no union, marriage of hands should be forbidden by law.

There are still subjects upon which even the "Infallible" Church of Rome has not in all these centuries deigned to pronounce. She still declines to say absolutely whether the sacrament of marriage—for with her it is a sacrament—is conferred by the minister of God, or by the contracting parties themselves. We believe, however, that the balance of opinion within her pale leans decidedly towards the latter opinion.

Still, as enlightened outsiders, we can only piously trust it may not be so, for it must logically bring

us to the conclusion that exceedingly few "happy pairs" are ever lawfully married at all.

"The hearts of old gave hands;
But our new heraldry is hands, not hearts."

This belief that marriage is ever becoming less and less an affair of love is as old as history, and may keep company with two more subjects exactly like it in that respect—the degeneration of courtly manners, and of faithful, humble servitors.

The world never was and never will be without its reference to "The gentlemen of the old school," and Shakespeare's Orlando might in any age make his familiar speech to Adam, beginning,—

"O good old man, how well in thee appears
The constant service of the antique world.
Thou art not for the service of these times,
When none will sweat but for promotion."

And yet—and yet! Well, it is hard to believe that these many weather-gauges are only confirmations of the pessimist view that the whole world is rapidly going to the bad. Anyway, it is refreshing to think that the lovers of this morning are an exception to the general rule, insomuch, at least, that neither loves, or has ever loved, any one else.

That alone, in a pair whose respective ages are thirty-three and twenty-three, is a most rare and even startling phenomenon.

The hour is early, as befits the desired privacy of the whole ceremony, and the breakfast is the *bona-fide* necessary meal of every morning, and a wedding one in no single sense, save that it takes place after the marriage of two of the party.

It was also unavoidable that Hector should provide himself with a "best man," and he had selected his light-hearted friend, Count de Turgy—first, because he was a favourite companion, but still more

from the fact that the Frenchman was just off upon one of his protracted stays on the Continent, and that therefore he could not jabber about the marriage in English clubs and country houses.

Very sweet has been the intercourse of the lovers during these latter times.

"It seems so different," Vaia said, last night, sitting out with Hector upon the balcony, "my being married to you now, to what it would—well, according to our first programme."

"You mean you know me better?"

"Well, no; I think I knew you quite at first, deeply—utterly. All I have learnt since is nothing but the confirmation of my original impressions or guesses."

"I may say the same of you."

"I love to hear that."

He pressed her hand, which he held captive.

"What I want to explain is that I have grown so delightfully accustomed to you. I mean to your presence—your ways."

"And would it not have been the same had you done this after the ceremony?" asked Warrington, amused.

"I think not. I fear I cannot quite express what I mean—what I feel so strongly; but I want you to know, at least, that as it has turned out, I rejoice more than you can think at the delay, however deplorable was the cause."

Hector sat watching her lips move, and her eyes flash in the moonlight. It was sensible delight to him so to do, and he oftentimes forebore to speak himself, reluctant to interrupt the pleasure even for an instant. But, finding she was silent, he asked—

"And so now you feel thoroughly at home with me?"

"That is it. I was very shy in the early days, and now I feel—well, really at times quite like old married people."

"There is not much ecstasy about *them*," he said, laughing.

"Well," she pursued, with a sort of mock pouting, "I had rather marry you like that. I don't mind you a bit now."

"Thanks."

"Oh, now don't be absurd! You know very well—look here, I looked forward to being your wife when we were first engaged, and even a little before."

"Aha!"

"Oh, I know it was shocking, but I did, as one looks forward to heaven——"

"That's flattering!"

"Stop a bit, sir! To a happiness which is half spoiled by having to die before we can get there."

"Well?"

"Well, now there is none of that. It was not, you know, that I was ever really afraid of you; but I am a person who cannot bear being afraid, and, if you understand me, I was frightened of my fear."

"And the friction of daily intimacy has rubbed all that off, I suppose?"

"It is not quite that. Oh, you will laugh if I tell you, but—well, I don't care——"

"You know I love laughing."

"Do you know, I think it is the sea."

"The sea!"

"I am sure the sea is a great teacher of the right way to love."

"I don't remember ever thinking of that."

"Oh, but I have, often. The sea is so simple and grand. Whatever mood she is in, she is always dignified. It seems to me, while we look at her deeply, calmly—study what she says to us—every petty and unworthy thing within us flickers and dies out."

A kiss was Hector's only comment.

"If you do not wish to begin married life with a cold in the head, Vaia, I should decidedly come in and shut the window."

It was Lady Amaranth who spoke from within, and her warning was dutifully received.

Then the Count made them all play baccarat for pennies, just to kill an hour before they broke up, and he and Warrington sought their hotel.

"A round game, my dear Lady Amaranth," he said, "is the only invention I know of to keep lovers out of corners, and force them to remain general property for a little while."

Then addressing the couple in question,—

"Oh, you hate me for it now; but it is not an injury you will long remember, so I don't care."

The means served its end. Marion won four and sixpence. Everybody slept as if competing for a prize, and so to-day the roses sown by Morpheus—those only flowers that money cannot buy—bloom liberally upon all the five pairs of cheeks.

"Well, it didn't last long," says Warrington, the married man, as he seats himself at table, with a ring of deep gratitude in his mellow voice.

"I had no idea marriage made one so hungry," says Vaia, gliding into the chair at his side. "Does it always, Count?"

"And how many times, in the name of Fortune, do you suppose I have tried?" asks he roguishly.

Then they were interrupted by a telegram.

"Much love and all good wishes from the fond friends at Studfield."

This is the only circumstance throughout the morning that, by the well-known law of contraries, threatens to bring even a love-tear or joy-tear, or whatever the rare gems are called, to any eye.

Everybody is either in mourning or subdued colours, and this, of course, out of respect to the bridegroom, who is forced to be so. Nevertheless,

the little party feel in a state of good spirits which fairly surprises them, so that there is not a shade of the proverbial depression which usually consigns weddings to a lower place in the scale of sadness than even funerals.

Although three months have passed since De Nares' tragic end, each one is possessed by the idea that a certain demureness, or even slight melancholy, ought to pervade even a wedding under such circumstances. This certainly does not promote absolute mirth; still, it effectually keeps at a distance anything like painful emotion.

It is Maid Marion—still maid, after actually starting on an elopement—who pours out the tea, for Lady Amaranth is too lazy to do so, "especially," as she declares, "after getting up like this in the middle of the night."

"Well," remarks Warrington, "all marriage breakfasts might take one 'wrinkle' from ours with advantage."

"A hint, a hint, for goodness' sake, Hector," cries his span new wife. "We'll have nothing to do with wrinkles to-day."

"What! Nagging already!" says De Turgy.

"But what is it?"

"That one hasn't to drink wine in the daytime."

"Why, I declare there's no champagne! How very odd!"

This from Vaia's mother quite innocently.

"Thank Heaven for it," pursues her son-in-law. "I abhor to feel after-dinnerish till the sun goes down. It is almost as barbarous as dining at two, and being expected to sparkle over a fat tea towards seven o'clock."

"Oh," says the bridesmaid in disguise, "I don't see that."

"No!" puts in the Count. "You like getting half tipsy o' mornings! Brava, Mademoiselle!"

"Don't be tiresome, Count," she goes on, trying in vain not to laugh immoderately. "You know very well I refer to the latter part of Hector's——"

"Hector, Hector!" all exclaim at once. "Well done, well done!"

Marion blushes scarlet, and stamps so violently under the table that everybody hears it.

"I declare you are all a great deal too bad," she cries almost angrily. "I hear you all call him so right and left, and I naturally—it was a slip of the tongue."

"From a slip of a girl," says Vaia.

"Oh, that is excellent," says the child of the party—a very spoiled one. "You have only been married about five minutes yourself, my lady! So there! But I wanted to say—and what is more, I *will*"—(Hear, hear, all round)—"that last year, when mamma and some of us were at the seaside——"

"Yes, just a dozen or two," says De Turgy.

"We always dined at half-past one, and delighted in it."

"Then," said he, "you will delight in anything."

"Why so, pray?"

"Because you are yourself delightful," he concluded, with Gallic gallantry.

And so in very empty chat—mere froth, in fact—the protracted meal, for no one was in a hurry, sped its length along.

Towards noon, Lord and Lady Warrington took a cheerful farewell of the rest, though not for long, as they were careful to say, and started on foot, and arm-in-arm, as the Frenchman said, "*à la* Darby and Joan," for the railway station.

There was almost a revolution in the little household when they announced that they would not be seen off. They, however, had to submit at last, when they found carping was of no use.

At the station the pair were met by Baines, that king of valets, and Vaia's French maid.

They were not bound for Hector's place. He had been there too recently under depressing conditions. So a friendly nobleman, *en route* for Norway's salmon rivers, had placed his really lovely abode in the lake district at the happy pair's disposal for as much honeymooning as they might feel disposed to indulge in.

"And you know, old fellow," this liberal friend had added, "whenever you are sick of spooning and cooing, and that sort of thing, why, there's the water and the trout, you know."

However, they found Amblemere Turrets a perfect Elysium, and stayed a whole fortnight, venturing the while—all things considered—wonderfully little time upon "the water and the trout, you know."

But as the train steamed off on the marriage morning, a sudden curve brought it for a few moments, at a distance of half a mile, right in sight of Lady Amaranth's drawing-room window; and Marion, foreseeing the event, had taken her station some time before near the open casement, and as soon as she spied the engine, gave note, like some dainty little call-bird, to the rest, who came crowding about her—the Count with a huge pair of racing glasses.

"Eh, *bien*, and what do you see?" he said, holding them to her eyes. "Eh, *petite sentinelle*?"

"Why, I declare, I think I see darling Vaia waving her handkerchief to us from the carriage window."

"Ah bah! It cannot be. If she is at the window, she is not looking this way."

"And why not, pray?"

"Because then he must be at the other side, *son bien aimé*, and *vous sentez bien*!"

"Well, I'm not so sure about that. I tell you,

Count, if I were married to twenty Warringtons, I declare I should look this way! I am sure it was her handkerchief."

"Then it was. No doubt you knew it by the hem."

"Count, I don't like you the least to-day."

"Then I wait till to-morrow."

And little Marion was quite right. Are women ever wrong in these matters? Yet that is what even clever men like the Count will never learn. They are so much more vain than we are—in essentials, that is. So like a man, for instance, to think a bride must necessarily be engrossed in her male partner almost before the train which bears them away attains full speed, so that she cannot spare a glance for the home she is leaving, in a sense, for ever!

She perfectly saw Marion's greeting, even as the girl saw hers, for she, too, possessed a cavalier with glasses.

"Oh, look, look, Hector!" she cried, delighted; "they see us." And then she held the little telescope to her lover-husband's eyes, and pushed him forward with her other hand, in a gesture that was half a caress, till his head almost went out over the door.

CHAPTER XL.

DE MORTUIS.

“SPEAK nothing but good of the dead,” says the Latin adage; but there are two sets of people to whom it does not, and was never meant to, apply. These are historians and journalists; and poor Augustus de Nares was made as free with by the latter scribes after death, as are many superior ones while living.

His unpaid bills, his dealings with the sons of Israel, his IO U's or other claims for debts of honour—all these things kept coming up like scum to the top in the newspapers and society journals, until nice-minded people truly declared that their anger rose at the bare sight of the murdered man's name.

That these endless paragraphs were effectual in increasing the sale of such publications as afforded them the largest type, and indulged, regarding the same, in the fullest detail, there is no dispute.

There is, and must always be, a large proportion of the public chronically gnawed by what is called a morbid craving. The forbidden, the shocking, and the untellable, have an undoubted attraction for the multitude, chiefly because it appeals to curiosity and ignorance—those twin daughters of idleness.

There was, however, one reader of these sad scourings of an ill-spent life that was past, who perused them with racking interest, albeit with intensest disgust, and from whose innocent breast all those motives were utter strangers. This was a young girl, Marion Heatherly by name.

If she has appeared in recent moments unduly gay—if the woe and grief with which her lover's tragic exit from this world at first inspired her, has been strangely lessened or dispelled in the space of three short months—well, her reading of all that appeared in the better newspapers of the day worked the alteration.

In judging her, it must be borne in mind that when at first De Nares' name began to be blackened in this manner, Marion was furiously indignant.

To confute the calumnies and to vindicate the honour of her dead lord, whose lips were closed for ever against his slanderers, appeared to her warm and valiant heart as a simple and bounden duty incumbent upon herself or Warrington, and even upon all who had ever known him.

These were the eyes with which alone she read.

Fact upon fact, evidence upon evidence, had to be brought to bear before this weak, fragile, but most gallant of little champions would abate one tittle of her faith. She was as the blind who will not see, the deaf who will not hear. All praise to her for it!

But at the same time Marion was no fool.

Her first doubts were awakened by the way in which her urgent appeals for aid, action, and, at least, some signs of indignation, were received by the dead man's brother.

That Hector loved De Nares the girl never flattered herself; but she knew he was just, honourable, and sensitive—in some ways at least—to the world's opinion. Even for Vaia's sake he would surely be loth to incur, on the eve of his marriage with her, such odium as cannot fail to occur to the head of a noble house through the so recent misdeeds of an only brother and heir-presumptive.

But Warrington, while receiving the young girl's protests with touching sympathy and a gentle

patience which never flagged, yet showed her too plainly there was nothing to be done; and this hopeless inaction on his part gradually awoke the silenced voices of reason and cooler judgment within her.

Had Hector shown temper and irritability, had he betrayed the faintest traces of resentment against his deceased relation for the exquisite pain, shame, and lamentable publicity he was now enduring through his brother's misconduct, things might have gone very differently. As it was, the fine point of the wedge had but to be introduced, and the whole false fabric of Marion's esteem, admiration, and love for the departed scapegrace, was doomed from that hour.

The *coup de grace* came some weeks later on, when she discovered the evil company he had kept had not been confined to his own sex exclusively.

Much, very much evidence opportunely cropped up upon this head, which it is unnecessary to explore.

There are not many good women who could persistently go on loving a really bad man, had they utterly ceased to hope, sooner or later, for his conversion. The grave puts an end to all such sanguine delusions, and to love the mere memory of a blackguard is neither heroic nor commendable.

So it struck Marion; and the result which came some two months after her quasi widowhood was just a cold dull blank.

Very sad and dejected was she at first, when certainty supplied the place of the last flickering doubt.

The gentle Vaia was not so occupied with her own love-making but that, with that true affection which is ever watchful, she observed, and indeed lovingly extracted, some admission of the change in the candid girl, and set her own brain busily to

work, devising how best she might turn the discovery to her friend's advantage.

Occupation! That was evidently the grand point; but of what kind? In so quiet a life as they were leading at the unfrequented little sea-town, how find new fields for an energy suddenly baulked of its object?

Now Lady Amaranth kept up an almost daily correspondence with her still beloved nephew—the one great affection of her life.

But while this postal intercourse procured unto her spirit the keenest joy, it often sorely taxed her bodily energies. Eyes and hand oftentimes rebelled against the tyranny of mind and heart; and Lady Amaranth, with that plaintiveness often a habit with fine ladies, made no secret of the fact. It happily struck Vaia that Marion, with whom Clarence Hood had ever been a favourite, had more than once during his exile exchanged long letters with her friend, and she now encouraged her mother to use their fair and *désœuvrée* guest as a willing amanuensis in the heavy correspondence.

Vaia had the tact to effect her design without giving it the air of a *parti pris*, and she had the satisfaction of seeing Marion glide into the position as by a charm.

From that day, too, she noticed that, for some reason or other, her cousin's letters seemed to grow insensibly longer and longer, while they decidedly improved alike in interest and spirit.

She would have thought it stranger still had she known that the new secretary found herself now and again adding a little paragraph of her own by way of postscript.

The fact was, that this little person had nothing of the mere machine about her, and could never have brought herself to play the part of one.

With the best and warmest of hearts, and one

of those easily excitable natures that take a lively interest in everything that is really interesting, Marion would have turned any occupation, not hopelessly a drudgery, into a field for development, and something of artistic achievement. If a spice of fun or humour could be slipped into the dictator's rather colourless periods, Marion would look up at her ladyship with merry, wistful eyes, and, with a childlike boldness which never offended, plead to have it inserted.

"Do you not think it will make him laugh?" she would say *naïvely*, delighted at her own wit; and Lady Amaranth, who had that admiration for good things which is not uncommon in those who cannot invent them, was charmed to have the said "*mots*" passed off as her own, and had no misgivings as to her dear Clarence not accepting them as quite genuine.

And in the young man's answers, the intervention of "his sweet little friend," as he had grown mentally to style her, soon began to make itself apparent. The religious "awakening" which had followed his severe illness was destined never more to end. His happiness in the next world—for he was too sincere to ascribe his piety to the pure love of his Maker—would henceforward always be the main-spring of his thoughts, feelings, and actions. But his holiness, which had for months been growing melancholy, if not downright gloomy, under somewhat depressing surroundings, revealed all at once a degree of hopefulness, and a kind of hallowed joy, most grateful to his aunt, who, being a sensible enough woman at bottom, was not slow to give credit where credit was due.

She felt, as she compared the old letters, both sent and received, with the new, how magical was the touch of youth and beauty, even upon a life whose owner looked upon it as blighted; and she

smiled now at her own past blindness in imagining that her little scraps of fashionable intelligence, innocent bits of ill-nature, or harmless items of scandal, could possibly have amused or interested a man in Clarence's very peculiar position.

Hood was indeed one of those mixtures of strength and weakness who are often so potent in the world's history for good or for evil, his special weakness being in his judgment; his strength, in an uncompromising readiness to sacrifice his own ease, tastes, inclinations, and passions to any cause which, rightly or wrongly, he had espoused in obedience to a sense of duty.

Of such are fanatics, saints, and most ready martyrs, either to the reeking sword of religious persecution, or the often far more trying agonies of a long life devoted to penance, compunction, and obedience. Of such, too, are very often the religious persecutors themselves. On the other hand, they not seldom supply the material out of which discontent and revolutions are supplied.

The safeguards against these violent probabilities, in the case of Clarence Hood, were his conservative bringing up, his cultured education, and his naturally sweet and gentle disposition. Add to all this that he was truthful and honourable as the day, and so tender of heart that it was always more painful to him to witness suffering in others—ay, even in dumb animals, especially when wantonly inflicted by man—than to endure it himself.

Lady Amaranth and her "daughter by deputy," as Marion fancifully christened herself now Vaia had vacated the position, had been discussing Clarence at some length on the morning after the wedding, when the former said,—

"Of course, now Vaia is married, I mean to have the dear boy back; but it is as well not to remind him too pointedly of the past, by telling him to come at once."

"No," said Marion, "that would not do. It would be too like what my slangy brother calls 'One down, t'other come on'; wouldn't it?"

"What a horrid expression!" exclaimed the fine lady, instinctively applying her scent-bottle to her aristocratic nose, as if that process might weaken the effect. "Still, I admit it is forcible. But Marion, my love, what in the world shall we do with ourselves now?"

"How do you mean, dear Lady Amaranth—now this minute, for the whole vast future, or do you allude to to-morrow, or any special date?"

"Well, I mean when we leave this place. Now Vaia is gone, the *raison d'être* of our living here no longer exists, and yet I cannot decide what to do."

"Why should we not go down to Studfield? You know how delighted papa and mamma would be; and the screaming of the many children might even be bracing to our nerves after the unnatural silence of this town."

"Thanks, dear, awfully. Hospitality runs in the Heatherly blood. I have no doubt I should enjoy a visit there of all things, as I never fail to do; but I wonder if they would grant me an even greater favour just for once?"

"A favour? Oh, I'm sure they would. What can it be?"

And she came away from the window where she had been contemplating the sea, without admiring it much, after the fashion of the very young, and confronted her "new mamma" quite excitedly.

"I wonder if they would lend you to me?"

"But they have already, haven't they?" said the girl, laughing.

"My child, there is many a man who will lend you a book in his own house who won't hear of your taking it away; and as far as books are concerned, it is a ver^y wise plan."

"I dare say, but I don't understand."

"I wonder if they would let me take you abroad?"

"Oh, Lady Amaranth, how delightful! I—I can speak French!"

"Very decently; and you have never left England."

"I have never had the chance."

"I will write to your dear mother to-day. I may say, then, that you wish to come?"

"That I am dying to! At least, that will not displease them, will it? You see, there are so many of us. When do you think of going?"

"Why, not just yet—not for a fortnight, at any rate."

"Very well, then; if they can't exist without me at Studfield, I might run down and just refresh their vision with a sight of me," the girl said, laughing, "before we start."

"Yes; that would fit in very well. I have some law business in town, which will occupy some days."

"And when we do start, Lady Amaranth, where do you think we shall go?"

"How would it be if we began with Paris?"

"Paris! Oh, I would give years of my life to see it. Yes; and then?"

"Why, after all your sight-seeing you will want a little rest, and I thought——"

"Oh, yes, you thought—oh, pray go on—you thought."

"Well, that we might push our way down to the South, and go and see dear Clarence; and we might finally all come home together."

CHAPTER XLI.

A BRIDE'S LETTERS.

NEWLY wedded brides are not expected to write long letters, even to their mothers, judging from such samples of first-post nuptial epistles as we have from time to time been privileged to peep at. The usual formula seems to be something after the following pattern:—

“DEAREST MAMMA,—

“I promised you a few lines to-day, and now write to tell you we arrived here quite safely yesterday, but half an hour later than we expected—the train being that much behind time. Freddie took the greatest care of me during the journey, which I enjoyed very much. We got here just in time for a short stroll before dinner. This is a lovely spot—such mountains and trees!

“I played and sang to Freddie after dinner, but the piano was so fearfully out of tune, I’m afraid it was rather a failure.

“Darling mother, I am so happy, and feel certain that Freddie means to spoil me most *terribly*, so that I fear you will find me grown quite unbearable when next we meet.

“With fondest love, *et cetera*.”

Now, although it was not in Vaia’s nature to indite quite such a “complete letter-writer” specimen as the above, still, her first missive to Lady Amaranth did not, truth to say, differ from it in so great a degree as to merit its insertion here.

After all, what should a girl write at such a time? She has but just left home, can have seen no visitors, heard no news, and, unless she be endowed with a most unusual taste and gift as an essayist, surely the "short and sweet" will be her obvious and wisest selection in point of style.

Arrived safely? Of course she has. It is we forget how many hundred thousand to one in favour thereof. Intensely happy? Another foregone conclusion. When people seek the felicity of a life-time, it were hard indeed that they should be bankrupt within the first twenty-four hours.

Even for his own sake, a man is not going to spoil his whole honeymoon by inaugurating it with bad behaviour. Besides, even in, we trust, rare cases, where doubt or slight disappointment have thus early shadowed the young bride's soul, she is of course not going to make matters worse by proclaiming in such a hurry that she fears she has made a mistake, and least of all to her mother, whose tender heart, still bleeding from the wrench of parting, it were cruel indeed to stab so needlessly.

No; all that a mother wants at such a moment is conventional assurance upon those two points, and even if the second be not always absolutely so true and complete as the writer would fain have her believe, why it is only one case more of "Where ignorance is bliss——"

But it was in Vaia's letters to Marion that she may be said to have poured forth her whole and secret soul unreservedly; letters to be eagerly devoured—as the sender well knew—re-read, and then burnt, e'er other mortal eyes should scan them.

The new Lady Warrington—as has been, moreover, sufficiently shown—was never in her life what is known as completely in touch with her worthy

mamma. She had too much of her father in her for that. She loved her mother with a real and natural affection, somewhat warmer and deeper than that which she received from her, and that was all.

It was from her dead father, too, that she received that education of which the art of composition formed so marked a picture. There is always something irksome in reading letters which are written with effort, and the inevitable stiffness of an unaccustomed pen.

Now Vaia's intimate missives bore upon every line the impress of being to her own self a relaxation and a joy in their hasty throwing off.

"I have had such an escape," she wrote in one of these. "Nearly wrecked my happiness for ever through one act of disobedience."

"'Happiness! Wrecked!' I think I hear you exclaim. 'Surely some joke or absurd exaggeration, for Warrington would never be so cruel as to—' *et cetera*."

"Well, nothing can be more real. We should have been parted for ever if I had died, shouldn't we? Very well; I as nearly killed myself as she of the mistletoe bough, but in a still more idiotic manner. You know I can swim very fairly; so Hector, having ascertained that fact—*upon my honour*—lifted me into a canoe, and gave me my first lesson in 'the sublime art of paddling. I know you have never tried it, so I wish I could give you any idea of the first sensation. You know how comfortable—how delightfully safe—both men and women always look in these flimsy little skiffs? Well, my dear, the contrast between preconceived ideas and first experience is here something frightful. A pendulum upside down is what I felt most like. As for my legs, I seemed to have parted with them for ever, and I nearly

asphyxiated myself under the impression that if I breathed I must go over.

"The reaction, however, was not long in coming. The water was smooth as your own cheek. I wanted Hector to think me both brave and clever, so I did my *very, very*, as you and I call it, and, behold, in half an hour I wanted to go from our little private bay right out into the lake. This my charming tyrant would by no means allow; 'and mind,' he added, 'I positively forbid you ever—mind, ever—to attempt canoeing unless I am by your side.'

"'What?' I said; 'not when I am past mistress in the art?'

"'Not till I want to marry some one else,' he said, with such detestable gravity that for an instant I thought he meant it.

"Next day it rained all the morning, and he had to take the train to N——, where there's a great public library—for, will you believe it, Hector has got a new hobby, something about the poor—doing away with them I think—and he wanted statistics. Oh, he swears by statistics now, but I always thought them such stupid things, and do still. Hector—would you believe it?—is going in for politics in earnest, and all simply in order to ride his hobby.

"Well, after my solitary luncheon, which I hated to enjoy without him, but could not help it—the cook here is quite perfect—out comes the sun. It was evidently going to be a fine afternoon. Oh, how sorry I was he had insisted on my staying behind! Then I should not have sinned! Out I go, and for a time think no evil. Then I arrive, with no *arrière-pensée*, at that unlucky boathouse in the little bay. My dear, such a large place, the people often had big teas there when they lived here. It has two canoes and three boats.

"I won't bore you with my little battle with conscience, duty, and the whole tiresome army who always take arms on the side of right. I was bored; I longed to err, and I did it.

"Clearing the little barque from its heavier companions—it is absolutely as light as a feather—I led it like a dog to the farther end of the covered channel where they all live. There was a rail-way to the steps. I actually made it fast at both ends to steady it. Oh, I took precautions against every known form of danger, but little dreaming of the unknown, unheard-of peril which was close at hand.

"Very cautiously I planted my right foot in the very centre of the canoe, having first crouched down like a frog, still holding on with both hands to the steps. I well knew that the slightest thing would tilt the frail boat over.

"Looking back now, I must say, that according to my light, I took every prudent measure, save the wisest of all—leaving it alone.

"Of course Hector would have told me more, only how could he dream that I, his new-made chattel, bound by every law, human and Divine, to obey him, would thus presume to defy his awful authority.

"Oh, grief, grief, grief!

"The moment presently came when, if I was to embark at all, the weight—nine stone two, my dear! Hector weighed me the very day we came here, and would only tell me the result in ounces. You know I am good at figures, but those horrid stones so puzzled me, I was ages getting it right, which amused him detestably.

"Well, the weight—I am sure you have almost got a cramp in your own leg at this moment with my keeping you so long in imagination, looking at me crawling into that boat. Well, the weight must be transferred to the foot which was inside the skiff.

"Half my weight was gradually made over. I felt then that I might loose my hold of the steps, and clutch the sides of the canoe with my two hands, intending the left foot to follow at leisure.

"Crack !

"What do you suppose had happened ? Why—horror of horrors!—my right foot had, without a moment's warning, gone clean through the bottom of the boat. Down, down, down, while instantly floods of water gushed up through the broken planks.

The jerk freed both ends of the treacherous craft from my unsailor-like knots, and away we floated, my poor right leg acting like a centre-board, and preventing the water-logged remnant of a vessel from capsizing.

"But do not suppose I had forgotten the first duty of woman in any catastrophe. I had begun conscientiously to scream from the very first, and right lustily too. For the moment the wood of the canoe and the balance made by my petticoats kept us afloat.

Tableau.

"A young husband, returning in the innocence of his heart to the wife he has every reason to believe true to him, surprises her—a fainting mass of mud, weeds, and "draggle"—in the stalwart arms of one of the handsomest young gardeners in all Lancashire, whose beauty she, in her mischievous light-heartedness of a day ago, has wantonly prated and raved about to this same loving lord, and even christened him the English Claude Melnotte."

There was a postscript to the above, to this effect,—

"On no account read one word of this to my dear mamma. She would see not the slightest fun in any of it, and a great deal which would be no joke at all."

A few days later she wrote,—

"The rain has come on again worse than ever. Oh, my dearest dear, I am so thankful I haven't married a fine-weather mate. I knew an engaged couple once to whom it was providentially decreed to be cooped up a whole wet day together, and either quite alone, or as good. At the end, she said to herself, 'If I can't stand him all day for once, how can I spend my life with him?' and she broke off the match, remained single for years, and finally married a widower with two children, but a brain, and was, I believe, reasonably happy. You see, she did not expect much *then*.

"It is not that one wants to be perpetually amused, or played battledore or billiards with, or sung to, or even talked to. The reason I call Hector a good indoors man is because he is perfectly happy in that character, simply because he is busy: I don't mean that he finds occupation listlessly and merely to while away the time, but he is tremendously busy—be it with work or play—so that the gong for meals comes as quite a premature interruption, and we fancy the servants have made a mistake.

"I am still pretty much confined to the sofa from my mad *escapade* on the lake, so nothing would induce Hector to go off to his lucubrations at N——.

"He said, with a gravity to take in a fox,—

"'I find you are not to be trusted.'

"Severe, was it not?

"Well, after breakfast, he left me to my letters and newspapers for two whole hours.

"Then he came and ventilated his hobby to me, and, in doing so, declared he found out new holes in his plan he could not otherwise have discovered, and made notes with the keenest alacrity.

"Then we tried some new songs, I managing to sit up and accompany. It hurt rather, but I wouldn't say so.

"After luncheon—at which we had the Rector's little girl—such a pretty child of thirteen; she came over by permission for some flowers, and proved a most amusing little witch—I drove Hector out in all the rain for a short drive. He grumbled delightfully, but I am sure enjoyed it.

"After changing his clothes—nearly as wet as mine were on Monday—he gave me my first long lesson in *piquet*. It seems hopeless to me at present, since my knowledge of cards is confined to playing the worst rubber of whist in England bar none. I asked Lady Bagley once, and you know she is a judge; and she said, with characteristic frankness, 'Well, my dear, you do.'

"But my master tells me I cannot judge till I have become familiar with what he calls the mere *marche* of the game, and he says I shall probably both like it and excel at it some day.

"In the evening we had another total change. Hector told me long ago that my French, though very good, was decidedly rusty, and he is making me learn and rehearse with him *Circé*, that little gem of Feuillet's. He says perhaps if I do it well, we may perform it now and then at a country house. Meanwhile, we are to run through it every evening.

"Do you know what I really think? That it is charming to learn anything if you like the teacher.

"And I love mine!"

CHAPTER XLII.

SECOND LOVE.

Six weeks have slid by swiftly and brightly, and the lovely glades, vistas, and fern-clad undulations of Studfield are proving to all who may care to investigate the question that they are to the full as gloriously captivating in the prodigal riot of their autumnal colouring as erst they seemed when the early spring—

“Donned her virgin robe discreetly,”

some six or seven months ago.

Some of the boys, great and small, are away, but every one of the fair daughters of the house—from the eldest girl down to Peachie—are at home.

Even the truant and much-monopolized Marion is condescending just now to cast her unaccustomed radiance upon her own people.

“Anything for a change,” she actually had the audacity to exclaim in response to some playful taunt of her father’s anent the rareness and fairness of her presence, while she administered two sounding kisses on his ruddy cheek.

Studfield without guests! Was such a thing ever known?

“We asked several people to meet you,” says innocent Mrs. Heatherly, for the moment unconsciously looking upon the sweetest of her daughters in the light of a guest, and doing “company” for her accordingly, “but they could not come.”

Peachie, we are sorry to say, grows positively fine

for twenty-four hours towards all her other relations, and toadies the brilliant one, who is the fashion of the day, with unblushing pertinacity.

Place not your faith in children, for they have well-nigh all the vices of adults without either shame, remorse, or responsibility !

Lady Amaranth is on a visit to the Warringtons, at a rambling old Manse, which does duty for a country house, on Vaia's own private estate—that property over which neither her mother—now Vaia is married—no, nor even her husband, have any legal power.

“You will find us very dull, I fear,” pursues that eminent mother, Mrs. Heatherly; “but it is such a treat to us having you back amongst us at last.”

“Darling mamma, how can you talk so ! It is the greatest joy that ever happened to me. You know I wanted to come back ages ago, but, after all the Temples' kindness; I could hardly leave when——”

“I understand, of course, love. Then there is Mr. Hood coming to-morrow; but I fear that won't be much excitement, seeing you have just left him.”

To this utterance Marion made no reply, nor could her mother gather what the girl thought of her remark from any indication of her face, for somehow she had got Peachie right between that decidedly pleasant prospect and the speaker. Peachie has grown bigger and heavier, and is a handful to lift, even for the stoutest arms, and then, Peachie is a wonderful hand at climbing a human being of either sex.

Anyhow, there she was, so that Mrs. Heatherly had to defer her investigation to another opportunity if she cared to ascertain exactly in what light Maid Marion looked upon the coming of Clarence Hood.

Very sunny, restful, and pleasant had been that recent *séjour* of the trio in the south of *la belle France*.

The late Augustus' want of all ceremony—and even delicacy—had, in a way, been repugnant to the dainty girl; and although he had contrived to take her heart by storm, she had loved him in spite of and not for his shortcomings in this and so many other respects.

A man is by no means necessarily a true bore because he happens to bore certain persons; and even Vaia herself had been ever fain to admit that it was her cousin's violent love for herself that alone in him she found wearisome.

Down in balmy Provence the weather had been hot and luscious, and life lent itself more readily to conversation than bodily enterprise and fatigue.

The two young people had been thrown constantly together, and were mutually surprised at what they found in one another; she the most so, however—and for a simple reason enough—that whereas she had hitherto bestowed few thoughts upon him, beyond what was more or less entailed by their frequent correspondence, the young man had, almost from the hour in which news of De Nares' death first reached him, been filled with new thoughts and aspirations truly astounding to his own consciousness, and which he very soon found were only to be put away, however manfully, to return sooner or later, and especially sooner, with redoubled vividness and charm.

But why banish such sweet and lovely visions?

Ah—"thereby hangs a tale."

It was the logical sequence to be expected from the events and trials through which he had passed that Hood should ere long seek admission to the priesthood of the Church, in obedience to a real or fancied vocation; and with still more confidence might it have been predicted that, contrary to the views of most Anglican divines, he should side with the smaller section who regard orders as incompatible with marriage.

For it must be remembered that while the Church allows of and encourages the "blessed state" among her priests, she yet by no means disapproves of their remaining single if they elect so to do, and it need hardly be remarked that in the frame of mind in which Lady Amaranth's worthy nephew had till lately been he had only to be offered his choice of two courses in order at once to select the least tempting to an unregenerate spirit. But—

"Beauty is a witch
Before whose charms faith melteth into blood,"

saith Shakespeare: and if before Marion's arrival this neophyte was torn with doubt and racked with hesitancy, the sterner man within him suffered an ignominious and almost instant defeat so soon as the enchantress invaded the sacred precincts of his presence.

With that obstinacy which ever marks the inferior or spurious kind of saint, Hood still clung to his set theory, that every priest of God should properly be a veritable Louis de Gonzaga; and his internal battles now narrowed themselves into an oft-renewed hand-to-hand conflict between wedlock and ordination.

Not that he by any means expected to succeed in the former course, but still the question was, whether he should attempt it.

Always humble in regard to his power to please women, he had been made doubly so by his failure to win his cousin's love, even when she was engaged to him. After such an experience, indeed, a young lady must needs show her partiality very plainly ere he could bring himself to believe in it—especially from a being so beautiful, so dazzling, as, to his ascetic eyes, Marion now appeared.

Could it be that these two were about to illustrate Hector Warrington's view that he or she must be presumptuous indeed who says to any human creature,

"I love thee," if thereby is to be understood a never-ending devotion?

There was one little incident, however, which shone in Clarence's memory as a bright solitary star in a dark sky—a trifle slight in itself, but which, like the proverbial feather, might serve to show which way the wind blew.

It had occurred towards the end of that pleasant lingering in the South.

On the return of the little triangular party to their hotel one evening, they had paused, in crossing a rustic footbridge, to bathe their glances in the refreshing stream that fussed and noised below in a way quite in keeping with small individualities generally throughout creation, be they watery, canine, or human.

"Children," Lady Amaranth had said, "I must go in—I am tired; but you need not hurry. I will put off tea for a quarter of an hour," and so she left them.

The "children" were glad to remain out, but had nothing particular to say to each other. Marion had not begun to look upon her companion as a lover, and he had no idea that she would allow him in any sense to treat her as such.

They stood side by side for a few moments in silence. The girl was leaning with both hands upon the parapet, and the one next to Clarence was ungloved.

Perhaps it was that the shades of night were falling, or else he was thinking too intently; but certainly he was not aware of the fair young hand in any way.

Presently a strange faint cry caused him to look up in the contrary direction, and he saw a large white owl emerge at some distance from a dark mass of trees, and launch herself against the deep blue of the sky like a ship in full sail upon a moonlit sea.

"Look," he said, pointing upward to the infrequent apparition.

"Oh! what is it, Clarence?"

They always addressed each other now by their Christian names, in obedience to some whim of her ladyship.

"What a strange bird!"

"Do you not know what it is really?"

"I can guess, I think—an owl. I have never seen one."

"It is only night birds, I suppose, that see night birds."

And as he spoke, his hand fell, and chanced to descend lightly upon hers.

He felt her start, but almost imperceptibly, and she made no attempt to withdraw her own. It was Clarence who, after the briefest of moments, raised his, apparently to adjust his straw hat.

A second or two later, Marion withdrew hers. Her desire was to show him, by not snatching it away, that she considered his action as purely accidental.

It was, indeed, in this light that he regarded the matter; but he could not forget the peculiar nature of her very faint start, still less the intoxication of that instant to himself.

After that little episode, trifling as it may seem, there was a shade of difference, both in their mutual thoughts of one another, and in their bearing, even in the very tones in which they spoke.

It is almost necessary that a girl should have known what it is to care about one who is no true gentleman in order thoroughly to appreciate the man who is. It was an unexpected luxury to Marion to feel that every word Clarence said to her was absolutely true—at least, to the very best of the speaker's knowledge, while, whenever they wandered alone—and after the incident of the bridge, they

seemed to glide insensibly into the practice—Marion always felt as safe from the slightest unwelcome gallantry as if she had her mother by her side, and she told herself it would be still the same, even if some day she and Hood should make up their minds to become an engaged pair. How unlike all this was to poor good-for-nothing Augustus! Marion caught herself at times fairly shuddering as she contemplated what her life would have been confided to that young libertine's tender mercies; and then she would, in the justice and candour of her heart, thank Heaven that she had been delivered from an evil under which she felt sure she must soon have sunk, and exclaim,—

“Oh! Vaia, Vaia—yes, and Hector too—you loved me best when you thwarted me. Yet how ungrateful was I at the time!”

And she says so again to-night as she rises from her knees in her old familiar room at Studfield—that little sanctum so full, even now, of other memories—of Vaia, then betrothed to Hood, and of that glorious, beauteous young hero, whom she then believed, with the sweet infatuation of her youth and innocence, the departed Augustus to have really been.

Yes; it thrills her with horror now to reflect how she had lain awake in that very bed, with its white curtains and blue knots, thinking of herself as De Nares' future wife.

She was awakened by Peachie bursting into her room next morning, with the absurd, impossible intelligence,—

“He's come!”

Yet so it was.

“*L'homme amoureux ne mange pas!*” say the French, and it is almost as true to declare that anxious lovers sleep little better than they eat.

So Clarence had taken the newspaper train, as it is called, which leaves Paddington at about five a.m., and here he was to breakfast!

"And mamma says you are to det up," added the rosy little envoy.

So it was after a rather hasty plunge, and her hair all "no how," that Marion, still flushed with slumber, joined the others in the dining-room.

"You see, I have taken French leave to come a little sooner than I was expected," said Clarence, rising to shake hands.

"I'm sure you are only the more welcome," was the ready and frank rejoinder; and the friends met without a symptom of constraint or embarrassment, like two intimate companions who have but recently parted.

"We rely entirely upon Marion to amuse you, Mr. Hood," said the hostess; "for we are dullness personified down here, just now. Even Lord North-down is still away."

"Yes," put in the Squire, "he has not yet done being introduced by his German wife to her royal and serene relations. Hope he likes it."

"I assure you, for my part, I would a thousand times sooner be here with you alone," said the guest; and although a forced speech is seldom successful, this one went down very well, for the curious reason that it happened to be true.

Then Peachie said,—

"Sister Marion told me you were coming."

And she spoke, we are afraid, very much as though she would have had no objection to getting up a little flirtation with the interesting looking visitor upon her own account.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A SURPRISE.

BREAKFAST at the Heatherlys was a thoroughly English and hearty meal, where neither highly spiced "devils" nor Indian curries had to be summoned with a view to jaded appetites and weak digestions; and a custom had gradually established itself at Studfield to linger over the repast almost indefinitely.

Some of the young people were sure to be late in coming down. In this blessed abode, where everything was turned to geniality and loving intercourse, the late arrivals were made a pleasant pretext for those who had descended early to prolong their sitting.

Clarence Hood had the rare combination of qualities which fitted him for the rather arduous *rôle* of the only stranger in the midst of a large family. There are, of course, many who, finding themselves in such a position, would behave with perfect propriety and good taste, but at the same time there are few who would be considered, as he was, a positive acquisition by each member, great and small, of the whole party. Amiability will not do it alone. It requires a large amount of delicate tact—a quality which may be described as the fruit of much minute observation turned to account by a refined and tender-hearted person.

When everybody at last quitted the dining-room, Mr. Heatherly conducted his young guest to his so-called study, and made him free of it in the

heartiest terms during as long a visit as he would favour them with.

"Whenever the women worry you—you know, of course, what I mean," he said—"to do this, that, or t'other, just you run to ground in this covert, and you'll find free sanctuary, I warrant."

Clarence thanked him as best he could—a little absently though, the fact being that he was not just then in the mood for regarding any of the Squire's lady folk in the light of persecutors.

Here was an opportunity which might not occur again. Should he turn it to account? He could not tell how soon he might not unburden his full heart to Marion, and seeing the smallness of his actual and available means, would it not be best—fairer in every way—to set himself straight with papa beforehand?

He was on the very point of asking the genial *pater familias* whether he would afford him five minutes of uninterrupted attention, when one of the girls—not Marion, but a far more boisterous specimen—dashed into the room with a long message from her mother about a cheque, which her lord had promised in the readiest way but quite forgotten to sign.

No knock, no apology!

The poor Squire's little delusion regarding the Mecca-like impenetrability of his vaunted retreat could not but call up a smile, even upon Hood's very pre-occupied countenance.

He turned to the window pending the little domestic talkee-talkee, and found he had a good five minutes for cogitation.

"No; on second thoughts he would not speak either to father or daughter just yet—especially not to the father."

Besides, the old fellow, but a moment ago so genial, appeared slightly ruffled now. Above all,

why risk the chance—and was it not a probability?—of being incontinently banished from the presence of his divinity ere he had well begun to bask in it. Whatever may ultimately happen, he will give himself for once his foretaste of heaven upon earth, and will quaff great draughts of delicious hope, even if the dream be after all delusory.

So when the Squire was once more at liberty, Clarence found himself with nothing particular to say to him, and the former, just to make talk, and with no idea of treading on dangerous ground, began talking of De Nares' tragic death.

Now it so chanced that Hood, being abroad at the time, had not been told the fact that Marion's engagement was throughout successfully kept a secret from "the old folks at home"; and thus it was that he proceeded in the most innocent way imaginable to let the domestic cat out of the bag.

"Ah!" he said, "very terrible—very terrible indeed! Poor fellow! I own I never liked him."

"I did," said his host; "he rode so neatly, and with such pluck."

"Oh, he had his good qualities, no doubt. I only spoke individually, and upon a very brief acquaintance. Besides, I am hardly a fair judge."

The Squire did not seem to notice this, but said quite gravely,—

"Ah! a fine young chap as ever I saw. A sad business—a sad business!"

"The papers have been very hard upon him; you have read it all, of course?"

"No; I saw something about some debts, but I never seem to care for readin' scandal. The debates, the state of agriculture, a glance at the funds and the sportin' intelligence—that's about my measure."

"I fear," pursued Hood, "we must own now that you have all had a lucky escape of him!"

"*We!*" jerked out the elder man, amazed.

"There is no room for doubt. Mr. Heatherly, you know how much I have had the privilege of being thrown into Miss Marion's society of late. I need not say how impossible it is to know her without being inspired by—by very strong feelings of sympathy and respect."

"Yes," acquiesced her father simply; "May is the dearest girl in the world."

It was so completely the young panegyrist's opinion, that emotion for an instant made him dumb.

Then he said,—

"Well, we must all agree now, knowing what we do know, that however harrowing the manner of his end, his removal was a distinct mercy, in so far as it saved your child from a fate even worse than his own."

"Saved *her*? My Marion? What the d— Pray, Hood, will you explain what you mean?"

"In plain English, then, that he would have proved to her the most unworthy of husbands."

"Husbands! Marion! Why, do you mean to tell me he proposed to her?" and the Squire started up. Poor Clarence grew scarlet.

"You did not know, sir?" he faltered. "I fear I have been most indiscreet, but I never for a moment imagined the engagement was unknown to you; indeed, I fancied it was quite public."

"It is the very first I have heard of it. I will send for the girl at once—she never deceived me before," he added, his tone already modulating from the angry to the heart-broken, and he moved towards the door.

But Clarence detained him.

"One moment—one instant, only hear me! It may sound selfish, but just think what a wretch the course you are threatening to follow would

make of me. I, who profess to be her friend, will seem to have come down here—to her own home—to denounce her! Who knows what motives she may attribute to me? Oh, sir, let me implore, beseech you——”

“She should have told me from the very first. Oh, if you knew the love I have wasted on that deceitful child! Yes; I will have it out with her at once.”

“Then let me fly, for I own I am too great a coward to stay.”

“Not you! you are nothing of the kind. Don’t tell me.”

“Oh, she will hate me, regard me as a tell-tale—the basest of mankind.”

“And suppose she does, what of it?”

“What of it?”

“Yes; a chit of a girl like that, who could deceive her father—who cares what she thinks?”

As he spoke, his wrath had again conquered his tenderness. He put the young man gently but firmly aside, and seized the handle of the door. Clarence clutched him by the arm.

“Stay; you do not know what you are doing. I—I love her!”

This acted like a charm. The father’s arms fell at his sides, and he stood in a semi-bewildered way, gazing at his visitor as though he had not caught his words correctly.

Hood hurried to improve the occasion.

“It has been wrung from me,” he said, “quite prematurely.”

“Better too soon than too late in these matters, say I.”

There was something reassuring about this.

“And,” pursued the Squire, “is Miss Marion aware of the fact, and making a secret of this, too? I wonder how many clandestine lovers she has had in all?”

"You wrong her there, sir. I have not spoken a word to her on the subject."

"Quite right. You come to me first, like a man."

"Indeed, I don't know that I should have had the courage; but this strange mistake has torn my secret from me."

"No matter how it happened, lad; you've done the right thing."

He held out his hand, which Clarence seized effusively.

"And now, sir, an idea has just struck me. Before even seeing your daughter, would you—as a special favour to me—ask her mother about the whole business? Now I think of it, Mrs. Heatherly cannot possibly be in ignorance of the true state of affairs. Why, it was all published in the papers, although the bare name was, to be sure, suppressed in most of them—I believe by Lord Warrington's strenuous exertions."

This evidently told more upon the Squire's present mood than any other argument.

"That would alter the whole case," he said, much mollified. "Wait here, will you? I will fetch my wife at once, and you shall hear all she says." And in less than two minutes he reappeared with his better-half.

The explanation was soon made. A husband and father easily forgives a plot when it is evident its sole object was to spare him pain.

All sorts of tricks, it now transpired, had been played by his womankind, both upon the daily papers and the simple-minded lord of Studfield, during the time when every one was talking of the murder in Curzon Street; so that, while fully aware of all the other dreadful particulars, he never connected his favourite daughter in any direct manner with the case, or its aristocratic victim.

"And so," said Squire Joe, mightily relieved,

"you knew of little May's engagement to the poor fellow, my dear, from the first."

"Well, n—no," she replied, with an evasiveness surely pardonable; "not quite from the first, but—well, May wrote me an account of everything from Town."

"And begged you not to tell me?"

"Most earnestly; but I am certain there was no wish to deceive—only to spare you pain and annoyance."

"This much I can vouch for—knowing it, as I do, from my aunt—De Nares solemnly forbade her to tell you of their engagement, Mr. Heatherly; and he even urged her to elope with him."

"That," said the excellent man, "I am certain she never would have listened to." Then suddenly he added to his wife, "My dear, I haven't told you we have a new suitor for her. Mr. Hood does us the honour of soliciting her hand—at least, I conclude so, for he has just told me he loves her."

"Mrs. Heatherly," pleaded Clarence, "there was by right much to say and explain before presuming to ask you to give to my unworthy keeping the richest prize that surely man ever yet won."

Marion's mother hereupon looked both surprised and amused.

"And what does May herself think upon the matter?"

"She knows nothing about it," broke in her spouse, who had quite recovered his serenity. "He hasn't told her, that's the beauty of it."

"That is no proof she may not be fully aware of the state of Mr. Hood's feelings," declared the matron. "I know, my dear Joseph, that I was quite sure *you* were going to ask me a good fortnight before you proposed, and, sooth to say, I thought you provokingly slow in plucking up your courage."

For all comment the Squire shut his spouse's

mouth with a resounding smack of his own lips—apparently regardless of the presence of one whom he already ceased to regard as a stranger.

Hood took all these things as pleasant omens. Still he said,—

“I think you know that I am far from rich; but my aunt will enter fully with you upon all money matters.”

Seeing they were about to protest, he hurried on with,—

“It is not from my circumstances that I fear most, with so noble a nature as Miss Marion. It is very good of you to receive my very premature demand with so kind a hearing; yet I am bound to tell you, however, that I am still in the gravest anxiety as to the young lady herself.”

“But why should you be? You have seen so much of each other lately, surely if she did not like you, you must have found it out.”

“She may *like* me very well, and yet not be willing to love me. You see, I have not made love to her at all. I—I thought it so very soon.”

“And my child has said nothing to me on the subject; on that you have my word. Still, I can read her like a book, and it is by no means to encourage you in false hopes that I tell you I suspect you have nothing to fear.”

“I can only say, bless you for those words!” said the young man, with more solemnity than effusiveness—a sure sign that he felt deeply.

He then asked and obtained a promise from both parents that they would give Marion no hint upon the matter, that he might have a fair field and no favour, but pursue his suit as prudence should deem best.

To this they heartily agreed, and with many cordial words from all three, this little council of war stood adjourned till farther notice.

And if Clarence may be said to have begun paying court to his future wife from that hour, it was several days before he ventured to ask her "in good terms" to be his.

They rode together every afternoon, and somehow nobody but the groom ever thought of accompanying them, and that servant, indeed, rode such a long way behind that one day, when they had nearly reached home, and Marion dropped her whip by chance, her cavalier was off in a jiffy, and on his horse's back again long before the man could even see what was happening. But when the girl tried to take it, he would not yield.

"Do you want it?" she asked.

"No, *this!*" he said, imprisoning her hand.

"Well, may I keep it?"

Blushing deliciously, she hung her head, and murmured,—

"You must ask papa."

"Oh, but I have."

"Never! When?"

"Ever so long ago."

The girl made the action in all innocence, yet it reminded this pious lover of the correct thing to do.

We mean that she looked behind her, to ascertain whether the groom had witnessed the hand business. No; they had just made a sharp turn. He would not be in sight for two minutes. Clarence did not waste the time.

"He felt that day
A spirit, throwing off our mortal clay;
He felt in all the world they were alone,
And saw Creation centre where she shone."

CHAPTER XLIV

A PAUPER UTOPIA

THERE is a dinner-party at Lady Bagley's, and around her daintily decked, cunningly supplied board many an old acquaintance is seated, bidden to this convivial feast in honour of yet another betrothal—that of the shrewd and capable Constance Bagley with the ever young, ever gallant, and more than ever successful Baronet, Sir Magnum Bonum.

The engagement had made no little stir, many people declaring that it was a great match for Conny, who, in the many seasons she had been on sale, had never yet been known to obtain a decided bid; while others, who considered themselves quite as good judges of things in general, and of matters matrimonial in particular, persisted in seeing in the Court physician nothing but the little doctor he had been long years before, which was, of course, very narrow-minded and ungenerous of them, as well as absurd.

Admirably simple and sensible had been alike the wooing, the proposal, and the acceptance, as befitted persons of their years and discretion, who scorned to ignore the true circumstances in which they found themselves.

Sir Magnum, who had attended both Lady Bagley and her daughter ever since the latter could remember, had taken all of a sudden to calling when there was no apparent reason.

On more than one of these occasions the butler

had informed him that her ladyship was out. The visitor, however, having ascertained that Miss Bagley was within, had said he would walk up all the same. At these times the talk would be more of the kind known as improving, rather than amorous or complimentary; and to a listener, might undoubtedly have sounded just a little dull.

That the pair concerned were of a different opinion the increasing frequency of these confabulations proved.

Each lent the other books, which were scrupulously read and annotated. Then, naturally, they had to meet again to compare notes, and exchange more volumes. This sort of thing could only have one logical *denouement*, as both Sir Magnum and the lady very well knew long before anything whatever had been said upon the subject. He took no pains to conceal that he was growing fonder of his handsome pupil — as she was kind enough to call herself — every day; while it need hardly be said that if Miss Constance had wished to discourage her mature but still ornamental suitor, means would very soon have been found for putting these non-professional visits to an end.

Anti-professional would have been nearer the correct word for them, since during this period the great man's patients had pretty much to trust to chance as to whether their dear physician came to see them or not. That his practice suffered to a certain extent there is little doubt. The question is, whether it will not do so to a much more serious extent later on. There is something notoriously incongruous in the idea of a married confessor, and there are ladies by hundreds who opine that the same rule applies to the guardian of their bodily health.

However, Sir Magnum had invested enough to

be able to laugh at such contingencies, and he delighted to flatter the object of his affections by showing her that he considered no time spent in her society could be better employed.

"Since you have been good enough to let me come here so much," he said to her one day, in his rich, mellow tones, "I am growing more and more to grudge every moment I spend out of your society."

"And I assure you," Conny had replied, without the scintilla of a blush, "that it is delightful to me to have found one with whom I can really converse, and who is not above helping me on in my anxiety to learn."

But it was not till fully three weeks later that he came to the point. Sir Magnum was the last man to *brusquer* a critical situation.

They had been reading "La Morte," the lady having lent Feuillet's highly philosophical novel to the gentleman; and as it is full of various kinds of love—always supposing that more than one can possibly deserve the name—its discussion now presented a charming field of speculation between persons in the frame of mind in which these two found themselves. They were, as usual, quite alone, Lady Bagley being at that hour nearly always away at her card parties.

When a young lady is six-and-twenty, she generally can manage a suitor best without mamma.

The physician had said that while he honoured piety sincerely, and indeed looked upon a woman without it as downright repulsive, yet he considered Feuillet weakened his case by overstating it when he implied that, by bringing up a girl as a free-thinker, the logical sequence is that you make her a criminal.

"I agree with you," said Miss Bagley. "One might as well condemn religion on account of

the crimes of those who have been taught the faith, and in their hearts never lost it."

And soon from that they came to the tenderer portions of the story, and the fatal second love of the hero.

"The reproach to a man of falling desperately in love when well on in life, and while married to a woman he once thought to cherish for ever, although first in point of morality, is often the reverse as regards constancy."

"You mean that he only then really loves for the first time?"

"Quite so, the first being a delusion. He did not mean to deceive his wife when he married her; he deceived himself."

"Yes," said Conny; "I have always, from my earliest girlhood, had just that very fear about all young men."

"And are young girls so different?"

"Generally, yes. I think most men who marry young—I mean in our own world, of course—either fall in love later on, or, at least, are sorely tempted to do so; while, with us, I honestly believe the case is rare, merely the exception that proves the rule. I do not say we are better than men."

"But I do—incomparably better."

"I mean that women have to pay so far higher a price for any dereliction of that kind, as society is at present constituted."

"That is not putting it on a very high ground, but shows what a cautious thinker my dear Miss Bagley is; and, strange to say, she proves it at the very moment when I want her to have no caution at all."

"Explain," said she, with a bright smile.

"You made me happy just now, when you said you disliked boys; but perhaps you are

equally opposed to the other extreme. Miss Bagley — Constance — I have been spooney when young, just like the rest — not once, but often. I have lately awakened, for the first time, to the fact that I can do better — that I can really love; and I am quite sure it is for the last as well as the only time."

He had gradually got possession of her hand, and still held it unopposed.

"I do not see," she said, "why I should not confess at once that I am very glad it is so. We are both too — I will not say old, but too wise to talk a lot of nonsense, and imagine ourselves boy and girl."

"Constance, you have made me the happiest of men."

And so the affair had been settled — rather prosaically perhaps, but still, quite to the satisfaction of the contracting parties.

And now they are seated at the *banquet de fiançailles*. Indeed, during the above parenthesis, it has come to be half over. Lord Warrington is in high force, and has allowed himself to be drawn out concerning that new hobby of his to which his happy wife's letters have alluded more than once, and for the promulgation of which he is going in at last for serious parliamentary work.

Hector seldom kept a secret which he could discuss without dishonour; he did not believe in it. If there is anything in an idea, he argued, discuss it.

"Much of the original edifice will thus be pulled to pieces, but can soon be reconstructed with fresh materials; and if it deserves to stand, will do so at last."

"And you are really hoping to rid us of the poor?" asks Clarence Hood, who is greatly in-

terested in the question. The young man is not yet married, but very soon to be; and he has quite forgotten that Warrington is husband to his first love. There is indeed no man he likes better.

"Not quite so good as that," responds the peer, smiling. "'The poor you have always with you,'" he adds, quoting Scripture very reverently. "I would not abolish them if I could, thus depriving the rich of their most ennobling virtue—charity."

"Come, come," exclaimed Count de Turgy, "give us a sketch of it. If it is worth stealing, I will go off and introduce it abroad, so taking the wind out of your sails, as your yachtsmen say."

"Oh, do, and welcome, if you like."

"Pauper sociology has hitherto proved as hard a nut to legislators as education itself," put in Lady Bagley, who was quite an amateur politician in her way.

"All the more honour if he succeed," quoth the full voice of Squire Heatherly.

"Of course," said Warrington, "I begin—at least, some are sure to say so—by begging the question."

"We're prepared for that," said somebody.

"Well, then, let us first consider my objects. I want to discourage poverty, while being kind to it."

"Ay, there's the difficulty; the kinder you are, the more improvident and lazy the unprincipled paupers will become."

"I have a profound conviction," resumed Hector, "that the classes in question have a desperate dislike to being uprooted from their habitual haunts."

"To that, as an old magistrate, I can amply testify," said Marion's father.

"I admit at once that if this be not so, there

is nothing in my scheme. Briefly, then, it consists in sending all the poor—almost all, that is—of Great Britain and Ireland to one spot.”

“But where is the spot that would hold or be bothered with them?”

“Well, strange as it may sound, that is not the difficulty. Restricted as we are for space in these tight little islands, we could more easily find room at home for half a dozen more Portlands than for one convict station in the whole of our colonies.”

“Yes,” said Clarence, “because the measure would be opposed by every Colonial Government, whereas, at home, the powers which decree also carry out.”

“Precisely,” said Heatherly; “but just think, my dear Warrington, of the enormous cost of your plan.”

“On the contrary, if it were not going to save the nation millions a year, I’d have nothing to do with it. No, no; we have thrown away quite money enough upon ruinous experiments already. Look at our ironclads alone.”

“Hear, hear!” from several.

“But first,” went on the inventor, “as to the *locale*. Why, there are profitless tracts still, to take alone the sea-board, in each of the three kingdoms, which could be had for little or nothing. Only let me persuade the Houses of Parliament of the advisability of my measure, and the place to carry it out will be a fresh illustration of the *embarras de richesses*.”

“There I am with you,” said the Count. “Why not choose the Isle of Skye, turning out those grumbling crofters?”

“Or better still,” said Heatherly, “some of the most disaffected parts of Ireland”—a proposal which was received with acclamation.

"I conclude the district in question," put in Lady Amaranth, "will be conducted in a fashion to induce all the poor wretches to stay there as short a time as possible?"

"Well, no. I shall propose making them as comfortable as possible."

"And will they have to work?"

"Certainly, my dear Lady Amaranth," said Vaia's husband, "those who are able; but, of course, not nearly so hard as if they were criminals. Some portion of their earnings will be their own property, so that the best among them are alone likely ever to wish to settle down in this pauper Utopia, wherever it may be, and then they would cease to be beggars."

"And," asked Vaia, "do you expect to do away with poor-houses all over the country?"

"On their present expensive scale, dear, certainly; but a more modest edifice will still be required to afford outdoor relief, as it is called, to those who are partially able to support themselves. Also to meet temporary and casual cases."

"And you really hope," inquired Sir Magnum, "that under such a system pauperism would steadily diminish?"

"I am convinced of it. We should get rid of impostors, drunkards—no intoxicating drinks would be obtainable for miles around this 'happy land'—and in a great measure of the improvident; for the dread of being sent into what would appear to them exile would render the thriftless careful, and the lazy energetic and hard-working."

"The original cost to the country could surely not fail to be enormous?" pursued the physician.

"Heavy, no doubt," admitted Hector; "but that objection applies to all reforms, and then the money would so quickly come back."

"Well, I wish you success with all my heart,"

said the hostess, who has had good luck at her games to-day, and is sanguine in consequence. "At all events, the plan is ingenious and new, so that you deserve, I think, a great deal of credit, even if it should unhappily break down. I suppose you will abolish street-beggars?"

"Oh, utterly. You see, they will have no excuse for their whining solicitations. They will only have to put themselves in the hands of the nearest constable, who will refer them to the police-station. There, it is true, they will become prisoners until they reach their distant destination; but what of that? They will in the meantime be well clothed, fed, and placed in the enjoyment of every reasonable comfort."

"Now tell us," said the Count, "have you broached this astounding scheme to the Home Secretary as yet?"

"Yes; I have stated it to him briefly."

"And what did he say?"

"Well, his reply was guarded and diplomatic. He said it would require consideration."

This struck everybody as so intensely ministerial that it raised a general laugh, and the conversation turned to gayer topics.

CHAPTER XLV

IT COMES AT LAST

A WHOLE year—a very happy one—has revolved since the large dinner-party at Lady Bagley's, and natural developments are growing on all sides out of the circumstances recently and long ago recorded.

"Twelve months!" says Vaia to her lord, but looking at their blooming baby boy, who rolls, laughing and crowing, upon the rug between them. "Do you know, Hector, I always picture the course of the year in 'my mind's eye' as a circular road, but it never occurred to me to ask any one else what image it assumes to their mental vision. What form does it take in your mind?"

"Not a road, certainly—at least, not in the usual sense. To me, the course of the year is as a gigantic hoop, standing on end, with summer right at the top."

"How strange that both our tropes should be round!"

"No, Vaia, I cannot wonder at that; for if you come to think of it, the whole universe, material as well as mental or spiritual, is constructed upon the form or system of a circle."

"Oh; are you sure? How wonderful!"

"Dearest, you surprise me. Did you never find that out for your clever little self? Why, if I had thought it could have escaped even a few people, I would have written a book about it long ago."

"But I don't see it now. Do make haste to explain."

He opened his lips to obey, like a well-trained husband.

Then, like a well-spoiled wife, Vaia would not let him.

"Stop a bit. First, I'll tell you about my annular road. It goes like a great racecourse, and is of no particular dimensions, but at a guess I should call it ten miles across—I mean, drawing a diameter from, say Christmas to Midsummer. There is nothing inside the circle but waste land, only the course itself is a grand panorama."

"I see already it beats my poor hoop out of sight. Go on; paint your panorama, please."

And here Warrington tossed away the *St. James' Gazette*, which he had hitherto been making more or less ineffectual efforts to skim.

Vaia required no more encouragement to come and sit on his knee.

"Well, summer is all flowers and sunshine, with yachts sailing on my left—I forgot to say we travel round, always bearing to the right—and above them, hanging as it were in the sky, are snow-clad peaks, with Alpine climbers toiling up or tripping down. Autumn is just like one of Linnell's pictures—ripe corn-fields, bronzed peasants, fruits galore and golden foliage."

"Why, Vaia, you are quite a poet!"

"No; am I really? Well, a poet without his rhymes, then."

"Yes; thank goodness for that!"

"Well, winter is all ice, snow, skating, roast beef, and firesides."

"And colds in the head?"

"So like a married man! They have no romance."

"Oh, yes, I have—lots."

"I don't believe it amuses you a bit."

"Intensely—indeed."

"I won't go on."

"Nonsense. You could no more help painting me your great canvas of spring than——"

"Hush! No more I could. Spring is all in water-colours—showers, gentle breezes, wild flowers, young colts, heaps of lambkins——"

"Babies."

"Oh, don't interrupt. I'm coming to them. Yes, lots of babies; but, Hector, all the new-born infants in my panorama are cherubs with little wings, and they flutter all about, and nestle in the trees and roof-tops."

"Really?"

"Yes, indeed."

"I wish ours was like that."

"And why, pray?"

"Because he might take himself off occasionally."

"Monster! How can you speak so of that angel!"

And the young mother instantly left the father for the son, the heir of the house of Warrington at the same moment electing to set up a howl, as in justification of his papa's speech.

"A darling! You know, Hector, you idolize him."

"No; I'll be hanged if I do."

"Are you serious?"

"Perfectly."

"It's too revolting!" and Vaia very nearly cried.

"Oh," said her lord, "I only mean just at present. When he is not annoying me, I regard him with just so much respect as one feels for a being whom one will probably love very dearly—if he deserves it—later on."

"I think you are very horrid."

"But sincere. You know I don't believe in

loving by rule. Now, will you hear about my plan of the universe?"

"Go on."

"Well, in the first place, all great things are round, or very nearly so. Thus, the sun is round, so are the earth, moon, planets, and stars. Then, their courses are virtually in rounds, although elliptical. Now these circular things and circular movements produce cycles of heat and cold, light and darkness, activity and repose."

"So they do," murmured Vaia, once more putting down the babe she had comforted upon the deep-piled rug, and stealing to a stool at Hector's knee.

"What are that little child's alternate moods of misery and content but an elliptical circle? Pain and pleasure, alarm and peace, noise and quiet, strife and harmony, storm and sunshine—turn where we will, all nature and everything that comes of it is, in some sense or other, round."

"The ancients likened eternity to a circle."

"You see, there is nothing new in what I say. I venture to declare you can hardly read three pages of any of the world's great poets without finding some illustration of this idea."

"Still, it never came home to me before. It will help me to live; for I think, on the whole, it is consoling."

"Undoubtedly. The pursuit of truth always is."

Here the dressing bell rang. It was earlier than usual, but Warrington had to get betimes to his place in the House of Lords. His notable scheme for the concentration of pauperism was really assuming definite shape at last—not only in the inventor's, but in the public mind; and the question of appointing a select committee to inquire fully into its merits was to be discussed at an early hour to-night.

Thus we find that marriage had already worked two radical changes in Hector's character; for he had become keenly interested in public life, a thing for which he had always deemed himself too indolent; and secondly, he had grown into so surprisingly domestic a character that Vaia could hardly get him to look in even at his clubs—but lately such little heavens to him—in order that he might bring her the news, and all the latest *on dits*.

Perhaps what astonished him the most was that his nightly rubber—erst the very salt of life—no longer weighed sufficiently in the balance against Vaia and the fireside to drag him from his home.

A single sentence spoken by his wife not long after they married had sufficed to exhibit his position in a light entirely new to him.

“I do not dispute the fascination of cards,” she had said; “indeed, I am beginning to feel it myself, but in thirty or forty years, you will, I trust, be just as well able to enjoy them as at present. For a man still young to make anything of the kind the object of his chief mental efforts can surely be neither to his own advantage or that of others.”

Yes, he was now happy. He told himself each day that he had married the right woman. And yet it needed something more than this to make even such a man as Hector Warrington thoroughly wake up to the intense degree in which life had graciously been made sweet to him. He, like a duller mortal, must needs pass through the fiery furnace ere he measures aright the bliss which is his.

* * * * *

It has indeed been a time of agony, and we have not the courage, or rather the cruelty, to lay bare its harrowing details. Within a fortnight of the

little scene just recorded, Vaia Warrington had been suddenly stricken down by illness.

The husband and wife were in the country, and alone. A slight premonitory headache—a little *malaise* of which she made light—then, all at once, raging fever with high delirium. She had lately been devoting herself in another part of England to visiting the sick and poor, and although prudent enough for her child's sake—and as Hector took good care to see for her own—it subsequently transpired that the contagion of typhus fever had in some obscure manner fastened on to her, and here was the result.

What Warrington endured upon that first awful night while his servants scoured the country—they were nine miles from a town—for a doctor, good, bad, or indifferent, who did not come, never to his dying hour will he forget.

But worse was in store!

To tell it in as few words as may be—as the crisis approached, and whilst it lasted, every doctor agreed that hope of saving her was of the faintest. Recovery was just barely possible; they could say no more. A marvellously fine constitution contrived to turn the scale—backed, of course, by all that science and devotion could do to snatch the priceless life from the very jaws of death.

They say that a terrible fever always changes the patient for ever after. Be that as it may, this one certainly changed the patient's husband.

* * * * *

And now Vaia Warrington is well again—or, at least, pronounced out of all danger.

She is up, but reclines upon a *chaise longue*, by which her husband—grown marvellously thin—sits holding her hand.

He has felt, ever since he knew she was to be spared to him, that he has that to tell her which

will choke him unless he tries to utter it; but yet, how to express it he has not the wildest idea, so weak sometimes is language!

Dread of unduly exciting or upsetting his darling has hitherto closed his lips, and he is even now striving to read in her eyes that she guesses his thoughts, and is thirsting to hear them.

Never was youthful swain a victim to that tragic, comic thing, known as first love, more burningly impatient to tell its object of the alarming conflagration of which he is the victim—a piece of news which to her *éveillé* spirit is probably no news at all—than is this mature man—husband and father—to inform Vaia how inexpressibly he adores her.

It is she who speaks first.

“I should not have liked to die. How good God is to have spared me!”

“Amen to that!”

“It is not that I fear death, but—oh! is it very sinful?—I would not leave you yet, even for heaven!”

“Vaia! Vaia! angel of love and tenderness, I shall never deserve you; but I am less unworthy of you than you think, if love can make me so.”

Here he—the calm, the self-contained and dignified—knelt sobbing beside his wife. If man’s words are weak, his unwonted tears are strong.

“Oh! Hector,” she faltered, trying with her poor weak hands to raise him; “I think I understand. The one thing wanting has come at last—you are at last a convert to the individuality of love.”

“You have said it.”

“I knew you would be,” she added, just a suspicion of archness lighting up her thin but still lovely face; “or never, never would I have let you marry me.”

“Oh! when I thought—when they as good as told me you were hurrying away from me, what I felt, my God!”

"I know, I know! Say no more, I beg. I can hardly bear to see you cry, and yet you have made me so happy. Oh! I have nothing left to wish for."

"Yes, one more. Let me fetch our crown—our boy!"

"You love him, too?"

"Upon my honour—wildly!"

He went, but a minute later was back with the baby in his arms.

And so from that day forth Vaia was as much her Hector's queen as he was Vaia's lord.

THE END.

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The wise man's treasures better worth than
gold;

And none but fools and wicked men despise
them."—C. MACKAY, LL.D.

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